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DICK, THE FAITHFUL

DICK, THE FAITHFUL

A Novel

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "BEAUTIFUL JIM," "THE TRUTH-TELLERS,"
"THE LITTLE VANITIES OF MRS WHITTAKER,
"MARTY," "SLY BOOTS," ETC.



LONDON
GEORGE BELL & SONS

1905

*This Edition is issued for circulation in India and the
Colonies only.*

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DICK, THE FAITHFUL

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CHAPTER I

AN OFFER

"They say that women always know when a man loves them ; but that is a mistake that is never made by women."

"By the way, Kit, Markham is coming in after dinner."

I looked up at my father as he sat at the other end of the table.

"Captain Markham—really ! What a nuisance!"

"And why a nuisance ?" he demanded. I knew by the sudden look of frostiness in my father's blue eyes that I had said the wrong thing. "Why a nuisance ?" he repeated.

"Well, for no reason in particular," I returned ; "I don't care for Captain Markham, that's all."

"H'm—it's a pity ! He's the most desirable man in the regiment."

"Is he ?" I felt a certain shade of wistfulness creeping into my voice as I asked the question—a question I had no wish to hear answered.

"My father did answer me, however, and in his most testy tones. "Of course he is, and you know it. Thirty thousand a year, and the loveliest place in Blankshire into the bargain."

"And Captain Markham thrown in," I murmured.

"Oh, as for Markham himself, he's all right," said my father, bluntly.

"Is he? Red hair!"

"Red hair; as if that's any objection!" he exclaimed in disgust.

"Oh, but it is. And he squints."

"Nothing of the kind."

"He does."

"Pooh! Nonsense! And if he did, would that make him any worse a husband?"

"God forbid he should ever be mine," I remarked piously, at which my father fairly snorted, and then told me to run away and make myself look as smart as I could.

I went away—very slowly. I crossed the hall, and, turning into the drawing-room, went and examined myself in the long pier glass which stood between two of the windows. "Make myself smart!" I—Kit Owen—and for Captain Markham, of all men in the world!

You will have gathered by this time, my reader, that my father was a soldier. He was, and had been for two years, in command of that famous regiment, the White Horse. And I had been for some time

longer than that the mistress of his house and his sole companion, for my mother died when I was just seventeen years old. Somehow it had never occurred to my father or me that we should take any other course than that which we did take, which was that my governess was dismissed, and I at once assumed the reins of government, and, as far as possible, took my mother's place. In fact, the night that my dear mother was laid away gently in the churchyard of Owen's Rest, my father sent for me to come down into his study.

"Kit," he said, "I want to speak to you. Little girl, we have got to rearrange our lives."

"Yes, Dad," I replied.

I felt very choky, and very much inclined to cry, only my tears had been all exhausted during the few days that had gone by since my dear, kind, lovely, intelligent mother had quietly slipped away from us.

"Well," he began, "you'll have to do the best you can, my dear child, to run the house. It won't be difficult, as there are only two of us at home now. If it is, you must talk to the married ladies, and get tips out of them."

"But what about Miss Bloomer?"

"Ah! that's the point. I—I can't stand Miss Bloomer."

He hesitated a little, and then looked up at me in a shamefaced kind of way. "You are old enough to do without her now, Kit. She—she's an awful

woman! She would be marrying me if she were to stop here."

"Dad!"

"I know, but I always told your dear mother that that woman had the evil eye, and that if she did not protect me from her she would be very sorry for herself and me one of these days. It's the holidays now—that's—that's convenient. I will—I'll tell Miss Bloomer that I am going to make other arrangements. She'll think I am going to send you to school or something. Don't let on, Kit, that you are going to stay here, or she will want to stay on and be your chaperon."

But Miss Bloomer did not prove awkward. She accepted the fiat that my father would no longer require her assistance in taking care of me, and a handsome cheque in lieu of the orthodox notice, and she disappeared out of our lives. From that moment I was the mistress of my father's house, and on the whole I got on with my task fairly well. It isn't difficult to run a house, you know, if you have ordinary common sense, and are not above asking wrinkles from those who ought to know better than yourself. Just at first I used to go to Major Ponsonby's wife and get hints out of her, but by the time we were transferred from Chertsy Camp to Northtowers I had no need to ask hints of anybody, and the four domestics who ran our establishment knew that I was mistress in fact as well as in mere name.

We had never made the mistake of carrying our own furniture about with us, but invariably took a furnished house, and dumped ourselves down therein, with just enough personal baggage to give our temporary abiding place something of a home-like look—that curious something that comes with your own odds and ends of silver, a few miniatures, and sundry nick-nacks of cushions, photographs, lamp shades, and the like. You see, we had all our real Lares and Penates at Owen's Rest, a fact which kept us from accumulating too much rolling stock.

I think you will have gathered, too, that we were not wealthy people. The Owens had been people of great importance in Chalkshire, but in later generations it had been a case of always taking out and seldom putting in, and we had not been as particular as we ought to have been in seeking heiresses as our wives. Owen's Rest was but a portion of the estate it had once been, and our income, all told, was considerably less than two thousand a year. And, mind you, it is hard work being in command of a crack cavalry regiment on an income like that, to say nothing of our son being in the service likewise—I always thought of Derrick as "our" son, although he was three years older than I. I think if my father had been truly worldly-wise—as he was not—he would have put Derrick into a line regiment. As it was, he was a bright and shining light of that bright and shining body of men, the Scarlet Lancers,

and Derrick was one of the few poor ones among a perfect galaxy of wealth. Still, it was a tradition of the house of Owen, that the daughters should place themselves well in the world, and that the sons should find their career in the cavalry of the line ; and you know, my dear reader, that tradition, particularly with army people who are likewise county people, goes for so much.

The evening that my father warned me to expect Captain Markham after dinner I entirely disobeyed his instructions to make myself look smart—in fact, I did nothing to alter my appearance to what it had been during dinner ; and when he arrived and was shown into the drawing-room, I was sitting at the piano lost in a nocturne of Chopin. I did not hear the door open, but I heard it close, and turned my head to find a figure in mess uniform behind me.

“ Oh, is it you, Captain Markham ? My father said you were coming in. Why didn’t he ask you to dinner, I wonder ? ”

“ As a matter of fact,” said Captain Markham, “ he did ask me to dinner, but I could not get here in time. Half an hour makes such a difference at dinner-time.”

“ Yes, it does.”

I had risen, of course, and was standing, as a matter of fact, with both my hands in his. I did not like the situation ; I objected to Captain Markham holding both my hands—or, indeed, one of them, for the

matter of that—but I did not care to flatter him by making any point of objection to his greeting—it seemed to make too much of him, and I did not wish to do that. So I stood there as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a man coming in after mess to take hold of both my hands, and to stand looking at me with all his soul in his eyes.

“I’ll go and tell Dad,” I said at last.

“No, don’t,” he said, “don’t.” His voice was quite hoarse, and shook a little.

“Why, Captain Markham,” I said, “is anything the matter?”

“No, not a bit, but I want to ask you something—”

“Me? Well, in that case, ask it near the fire, for it is very cold here. Indeed,” I went on, “this is the coldest room I ever sat in in my life.”

He let go my hands then, and I moved towards the fireplace. He followed me. There was a huge fire of coal and wood mixed burning in the wide hearth, and I took up the poker and stirred it into a yet brighter glow. Then I sat me down on the end of the wide fender stool. It was the cosiest thing in the room, the broad padded surround of the great brass fender, with a couple of soft cushions set at either side, so that one could sit at the corner and lean against the tall supports of the white mantel-shelf.

“There, that’s better, isn’t it?” I said. I was still

holding the little brass poker in my hand—it gave me something to do.

"I wasn't dissatisfied with the situation before," said Captain Markham.

He looked very big, and, I must confess, very manly, as he stood up leaning one elbow upon the mantelshelf. Somehow, a man does look well in mess dress, and the dark blue-and-gold shell jacket and trousers, and gold-embroidered white cloth waist-coat which comprised the mess uniform of the White Horse, showed up Captain Markham to better advantage than any other dress could possibly have done. I confess that I mistook his meaning.

"My dear man," I said, "if you were amply satisfied with the mess-room why did you come?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," he said, laughing a little, "I didn't mean that; I was not going back as far as the mess-room."

"I give it up," I said, putting the poker between the bars, "I give it up, I never was good at riddles."

"Nor I," he rejoined, "nor I. But there are some questions in life, Miss Kit, that must be asked and answered, and I have come to ask you such a question to-night. I—look here, I'm a man of few words, I've never had the gift of the gab like some of the fellows; I don't believe in breaking bad news, or spinning out good; I don't believe in beating about the bush; I—I think it is better to say plump out what is in one's mind."

"Well?"

"Well, I came in to-night to ask you a question—in short—to ask you if you'd marry me."

I let the poker slip out of my hands with a crash on to the tiled hearth. So this was what my father meant! Captain Markham had already said something to him—they had planned it between them—and my father was really and truly anxious to get rid of me, and to a man for whom he knew I cared nothing.

"Well?" said the voice up above me. "Well, Kit—well?"

I took up the poker again—one does small things like that in a mechanical kind of way in moments of great stress. The anxiety, the desperate anxiety in the voice above my head upset me.

"Captain Markham," I said, keeping my head still bent down, so that he could not see my face, "I'm sorry—very sorry—"

The next moment he had dropped down upon the fender stool and had taken both my hands, poker and all, into his strong firm grasp.

"You don't mean that it's no good—that you are going to refuse me—that you are going to say no"—the words came tumbling out, one after another—"I—I can't make fine speeches; I'm a plain, simple, kind of chap—in some ways a bit of a fool, I know it, but I love you—my God! yes, as I have never known what it was to love any woman in

all my life before. I haven't been like some of the others, I haven't asked half the women I know even to be sisters to me—I suppose I'm too ugly to be much of a ladies' man—but I've got a heart, and it's in the right place—don't say you're going to throw it away—Kit."

Again the poker fell with a crash to the hearth, but that only permitted Captain Markham to imprison my hands more closely within his own.

"I know," he went on quite humbly, "that there is nothing about me to make a girl like you look at me twice, or, indeed, once for the matter of that. I'm no beauty, nobody knows it better than I do, but then you'd be able to make up for it in that respect. But if I'm not a beauty—well, I've always lived a clean, wholesome, decent kind of life, you—you'll say something kind to me, Kit, won't you?"

"I can't," I said desperately, "I can't. I never thought of it—I did not even know that you were thinking of me in that way. It's been sprung upon me; you've talked it over with my father—it's new to me. I can't marry you, Captain Markham, really I can't."

"But why can't you? Am I so ugly as all that?"

"Oh, no, you are not ugly at all." And I really meant it, for, if I tell the truth, beyond the fact that his hair was red—the sort of red that, on a woman's head, would have been called a glory, there was

nothing much amiss with his looks. He wasn't a beauty, and that was the worst you could say of him.

"You could never, never care for me in that way?"

"No, I'm sure I couldn't."

"There is someone else you—"

"No, no, I did not say that at all, or anything like that; you have no right to jump to such a conclusion."

"I have no right to express an opinion about anything that you do or say, I did not mean to convey that I had, but if there's nobody else, and if you do not absolutely hate me—"

"Oh, Captain Markham, I don't hate you. What nonsense!"

"Then mayn't I take a little hope that some day you'll think differently?"

"No, I shall never think differently—oh, I can't, I can't, if you were the last man in the world I couldn't marry you, it's no use saying I could. You should have given me a hint, you should have let me get used to the idea, you shouldn't have sprung it upon me. I know that it's—I—know you're very rich—"

"Augh? What's mere money as a question between husband and wife. Surely to goodness, if you loved me, my money wouldn't keep you from telling me so. It isn't as if the boot were on the

other leg. Oh, Kit, are you sending me away hopeless?"

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry; you can never know how sorry I am."

He sat there, still holding my hands. "Look here," he said at last in a very crestfallen voice, "I ought not to have sprung it upon you like this—I thought you knew—your father seemed to think you would be willing enough—"

"Yes, but why didn't you speak to me first?"

"Because something we were talking about led up to it. I didn't go to him solemnly and beg his permission to ask you to marry me—I never thought of such a thing, but something he said or something I said just led up to it, and the secret was out before I knew where I was. Still, there is no great harm done so far as that goes; you wouldn't have given me any other answer if I had spoken without your father having known anything about it."

"No, I don't suppose I should."

"Well, don't say definitely one way or the other to-night, think it over for a little while, say during the next fortnight. I'll keep out of your way as much as I can without it seeming too pointed. Think it over."

"But why draw out the agony?" I said quietly. "I shall come to the same opinion. You wouldn't like me to say 'yes' when I haven't the smallest feeling of that kind towards you. It's like the

artistic sense—one has it, or one hasn't it ; love does not come at will. I shall not feel differently a fortnight hence. Oh, why did you set your fancy on me, of all people in the world ? ”

“ Who is there of all the people we know, Kit, on whom I should be more likely to set my fancy ? ”

“ There are plenty of girls—smarter, prettier, wealthier, more fascinating, ever so much nicer than I am.”

“ I have not met them,” he said simply.

CHAPTER II

GEORGEY

"We take some of the most desperate steps of our lives without consideration."

I DID not see my father again that night. Captain Markham said he would go down to the library and tell him that nothing was settled as yet, and I parted from him in the hall, and then made a bolt upstairs for the upper regions as if Bogle-bo or the Wicked One were after me.

When I came down to breakfast the next morning my father turned the full fire of his curiosity upon me.

"So you and Markham didn't pull it off last night?"

"Captain Markham didn't pull it off," I said.

"Kit," said my father, looking up from the kidneys and bacon on his plate, "I hope you are not going to make a little fool of yourself."

"It's not my habit," I said, as pertly as I could.

"Markham's a good fellow, a splendid fellow," he went on, "out and out the finest soldier in the regiment, which is saying a good deal among a set of men so keen on soldiering as the White Horse."

"Yes, I know, Dad."

He looked across the table at me. "Kit," he said, "if there were not urgent reasons for it I should not persuade you or advise you to marry Markham or any other man. But there are reasons—urgent is not the word for them. I'm in a hole, a tremendous hole. I haven't told you about it, because it's no use worrying women with troubles which are unavoidable, and which they cannot straighten out. I would rather you took Markham of your own free will; you'd be happier, and he'd be happier. If you don't, you must clearly understand that you will get no sympathy from me. I have loved you, humoured you, coddled you in every possible way ever since you were born. Now I ask you to do something for me. But—by Jove! I can't stop and thrash it out now, I must be off, I'm ten minutes late as it is."

He swallowed down the rest of his coffee, and went clattering out of the room leaving me sitting face to face with my own thoughts. And, oh, how bitter they were! I pushed my untasted breakfast away from me, along with the newspaper and half a dozen letters, and there I sat, resting my chin on my hands, thinking—thinking—oh, all sorts of unjust and bitter things. I had read in story books of fathers who forced their children into uncongenial marriages, but that such could be the fate of Kit Owen had never entered my head. And here it was

sprung upon me, and I hated the man who was the cause of it. And yet, even as the thought crossed my mind, I drew it back. No, I did not hate Captain Markham at all. True, I did not love him ; true, I did not even like him, he had never been one of my pals in the regiment, but I did not hate him all the same. As I sat there, it kept coming back to me, that whatever faults he might have of person or of character, he was yet a man, and a gentleman. How well he had spoken ! Oh, I suppose a stage lover would have cut but a sorry figure had he used the words Captain Markham used—he had hesitated and hackhammered and then tumbled his words over one on the top of another until—and then I turned my head, and I saw that the regiment was going past in watering order. I got up, more to get away from my thoughts than because I wanted to see a few private soldiers and led horses go past my window. Then, when the end of the procession came, I saw the officer of the day stop and dismount, saying something in a cheery tone to his orderly. He turned and made for the gate of our house, the orderly going on in the wake of the horses and men, leading the officer's horse by the bridle. The next moment he had entered the room.

“There'll be the deuce of a row if this comes out, but I felt I must see you, and see you this morning, before anything definite happens.”

“Why—what do you mean ? ”

"I hear that you are going to marry Markham. Is it true?"

"Certainly not," I replied, with as much dignity as I was capable of assuming; "pray who told you that?"

"Oh, it's all over the regiment."

"Oh—I wish the regiment would mind its own business. Don't you know there will be an awful row if my father hears that you stayed here and let the men go on without you?"

"I must risk that. After all, it's not a hanging matter in any case. Come now, we've got three-quarters of an hour before they come back. Tell me, you're not going to marry Markham, are you?"

"I don't know."

"Kit!"

"Georgey," I said soberly, "I may have to marry —him. I don't want to, I don't mean to, but I may have to. You understand?"

"You mean the Colonel will make you? Surely he's not—why—you've always been so spoiled, you've always twisted him round your little finger."

"Yes—so he reminded me this morning."

"Kit," he said, "you know that Markham is beastly rich; he has everything in this world that a man can want except you—of course he wants you. You—you must clearly understand the situation. I have six hundred a year beside my pay, six hundred a year. It's been enough for me in a way. I've always con-

trived to live somewhere pretty near my income. What it will be like for two I haven't the least idea. But we might exchange. There are always plenty of men out in India anxious to exchange for the White Horse. Tell me, is it too great a sacrifice for you?"

"It is not a sacrifice at all, Georgey," I replied. "I've never been used to much money, but I don't think my father will consent."

"The Colonel won't consent, of course not; but then I don't want to marry the Colonel. The question is, Kit, what about you? If you could love me, if you could be happy, and make yourself satisfied—why, you'd make me the happiest man in the world this day."

"I can't think what my father would say."

"He would say 'no.'"

"Then that knocks it on the head."

"Not at all! There is such a thing, Kit, as going out and getting married off our own. After all, the Colonel didn't consult you about his marriage."

"No, but I daresay she consulted her father and mother."

"It's most unlikely. I think I see the Colonel marrying to order—doing anything to order. Gad! I think I see him!"

Between ourselves I thought I could see him too, but I did not tell Georgey that. He went on speaking.

"Nothing would be easier than for me to go over

to Idleminster, say, and put up the banns there. We should have to put the banns up, of course, because you're not of age, and I can't get a license."

"How do you know all this?"

"Oh, I made it my business to know; one never knows when it mayn't come in useful. I happened to be dining with Dallas the other day. She's away, and I was dining alone with him, and we sat in his den and talked till all hours. I asked him all about ways of getting married, and so on."

"I see. And you want me to be married in that way?"

"It would be quite simple—oh, confound it! here are the horses again, I must go. Good-bye, my darling. Look here, can't you come down and meet me somewhere this afternoon?"

"Why can't you come here?"

"Well—well, I don't want to put the Colonel on his guard. Come and have tea with me at the little cake shop in King Street—you will, won't you?"

"All right, I'll come about five."

"Well, don't be later."

"No, I won't."

I waved my hand as he clattered out of the room, and I saw him go out and mount his horse, riding away as if he were riding from his own door.

Then I went back and sat down by the fire. What had I done? Had I committed myself to anything? No. Had I promised to go away and become Georgey

Vancourt's wife? No, I don't think I had promised anything, and yet—and yet, I felt that if he persuaded me very much I should—I might—well, I might be persuaded into any course that he might think best. I got through the day somehow. The Dad did not turn up to lunch, he very seldom did, so I sat down to that meal by myself. I was very hungry, for I had eaten no breakfast, positively none. I got through the afternoon by answering my letters and making an extra long toilette, and as the clock struck five I turned out of the principal street and into King Street, and went into the little pastry-cook's where I had promised to meet Georgey.

Now, this little pastry-cook's was a great institution in Northtowers. I don't know that the mothers and fathers of Northtowers knew much about it, except that it was a shop where you could get exceedingly good cakes, much better than in the adjacent High Street. It was kept dark from them that behind the shop there was a little dainty sitting-room, whose one window looked into a garden patch which was a mass of greenery all the year round, for the walls of the backs of the other houses were covered with ivy, and not a single window overlooked it. It was the kind of garden patch that one sees attached to Dutch and German houses, but very seldom in England.

As soon as I entered the shop, with its smart *cerise* silk and white lace curtains, the door of the little

room at the back opened and Georgey Vancourt came out.

"I kept in here out of the road," he said to me in an undertone; "there are always such a lot of women hanging about the shops in this place, and the cake shops are the worst of all. Now we can talk our talk out without any fear of interruption."

"Suppose somebody else comes?"

"It doesn't matter if they do—the room's engaged."

He ministered to me delightfully, and then he unfolded all his plans for the future. He had thought out every move in the game, and he overwhelmed me with such a torrent of words that I had little or no choice but to fall in with his arrangements and desires. Looking back, I do not think that I ever meant to do what Georgey asked me to do that day.

"I can't give you up," he said, "I can't leave you to marry Markham. You'll be forced into it, you'll not have a soul of your own—you'll never have a soul of your own again. I—there's nothing for it but to put the safe circle of a wedding-ring on your finger, and to leave the rest to time and chance."

I was like a little bird that had been fascinated by a snake. You understand that his proposals jumped entirely with my inclinations, because I really was downright fond of Georgey. "Fond" of him, did I say? Oh, that was a poor word to use—I was head and ears in love with him. To me he represented

everything that was the perfection of bright and glorious young manhood.

Looking back, I have never been able to tell how I lived through the three weeks which followed. I saw Georgey every day, even the times when he was on duty as orderly officer, though then, of course, only for a short time when he was riding the troops to watering order. Captain Markham, true to his word, kept as much as possible out of my road, so that I was not very much worried by the question concerning him which was still under my consideration. And every day the toils grew closer and closer about me, until the morning dawned on which I had promised to go over to Idleminster and be quietly married. His idea was that we should go over to Idleminster at mid-day. It was only about twenty miles by rail, and I was to start by the train leaving Northtowers at ten minutes past twelve, and at the first stopping-place, which was about two miles away, Georgey would join me, having driven over from the cavalry barracks. We had quite made up our minds that we would not create a scandal by making a real runaway match, but would celebrate our marriage by having lunch somewhere in Idleminster, and would go back to Northtowers during the course of the afternoon. At Pordington, the first station on the road to Idleminster, I looked eagerly out of my carriage window, but there was no sign of Georgey. I wondered whether I had made a mistake, and that

he had promised to meet me at Idleminster. In any case, it was no use getting out there, the run to Idleminster would not hurt me in the event of Georgey not turning up. Of course, you understand that in my mind no possibility of such a contingency had arisen, or did arise. The train sped swiftly on, and at each stopping-place I looked out and scanned the platform, as I did when we steamed into Idleminster itself. But there was not so much as a sign of my bridegroom. I got out of the carriage as we came to a standstill, and walked slowly down the platform, looking from side to side, and wondering where Georgey could have put himself. But there was no sign of Georgey. I looked into the general waiting-room, glanced at the bookstall, and eagerly scanned every face. There was no Georgey ! Then it occurred to me that I would ask some official what time the next train from Northtowers would arrive. I turned to look for such an one, and found myself face to face with Captain Markham !

CHAPTER III

AN EVENTFUL LUNCH PARTY

"There is a saying that man proposes, but God disposes. We mostly doubt the wisdom of God under such circumstances."

CAPTAIN MARKHAM pulled up short as he saw me.

"Why, Miss Kit," he exclaimed, "I didn't know the Colonel was bringing you over to-day."

"The Colonel didn't come with me. Can't I go anywhere without the Colonel?"

I already felt myself as good as married, and put a shade of *hauteur* into my tones which ought to have had the effect of reducing him to abject humility. But there was no humility about him. He said, "Are you going to lunch at the 'Rose and Crown'?"

"No. Why should I be going to lunch at the 'Rose and Crown'? Are you going to lunch at the 'Rose and Crown'?"

"I am."

"You are very mysterious, Captain Markham."

"Mysterious? I don't understand you, Kit."

"Look here," I said, stopping short and looking up at him with wrathful eyes, "when did I give you leave to call me Kit?"

He gave a great sigh. "I'm sorry if I have

offended your majesty. I thought—under the circumstances—of my being on probation, so to speak, you would let me call you ‘Kit.’ ”

“ Oh, I don’t mind, if it will please you,” I said in mollified accents, “ but you’re not to think that I’ve in any way committed myself, because I do not much mind your calling me Kit.”

He sighed again. “ No,” he said, “ I won’t, I won’t, but—but here’s your father.”

I looked round with a start. Yes, there was my father, Colonel Owen, looking very smart and soldierly in a light tweed suit and a bowler hat, and he was close upon us !

“ Why, Kit ! ” he said, “ with Markham ! What on earth are you doing in Idleminster ? And with Markham—why, good heavens ! —then you’ve made up your mind ? Oh, that’s splendid ? Where are you going to lunch ? What are you going to do ? You’ve quite settled it between you, then ? I’m delighted, my dear, delighted. Markham, my dear chap, let me shake hands with you.”

If he had looked at Captain Markham’s face he would have seen that he was jumping to conclusions a little too soon.

“ We’ll go and lunch at the ‘ Rose and Crown.’ Some of the other fellows are there, as you know, Markham. But what made you come over to Idleminster ? You aren’t by way of running away, are you ? ”

Now during these words Captain Markham had

been looking straight at me. My face was ever a telltale one, and he took his cue from it very boldly and dexterously.

"We were not exactly going to get married, Colonel," he said in his slow, quiet tones, and looking very stolid and manly as he spoke, "we came over on a bit of a jaunt on our own. I hope you don't mind. I didn't ask you about it, because, being under consideration—on probation, as it were, with Kit here, I took it that you wouldn't object."

"Object! My dear chap—Kit, my dear, I'm delighted. You've never pleased your father so much in all your life. We'll drive to the hotel—it's a good step to walk."

He put up his stick and hailed an ancient landau which was standing on the rank outside the station.

"Hi! Cabby—landau. There, in you get. 'Rose and Crown,' Cabby, 'Rose and Crown.' "

I did get in. I wondered what I should do next. I looked out of the other side, away from the eyes of both these men—my father and the man who had saved me—and I wondered what I should do—how I should get out of it—how I should eventually explain matters. No, I could not think—I could not tell—my brain was all in a whirl. I expected every moment to see Georgey, with a face of consternation, looking at this sudden wreck of our hopes and plans. What should I say to Georgey? Oh, well, I didn't mind Georgey, he would be easily disposed of. But

my father—and Captain Markham—ah ! those were two hard nuts to crack, and I gave a great sigh as I thought of my inability to cope with either.

Well, in next to no time we were rolling up to the principal street of Idleminster, and drew up with a dash and clatter at the door of the principal hotel, the "Rose and Crown," the hotel, by the way, at which Georgey and I had intended to eat our wedding lunch. To my dismay I saw that a little group of five or six of our officers were just strolling up to the door. They drew up on the edge of the pavement as our ancient landau clattered to a standstill.

"Hullo, Colonel ! You've arrived in great style. Why, where did Miss Kit spring from ?"

"We thought you'd gone on, Colonel," said another. "How did we come to miss you ? Why, Markham, I thought you missed the train at North-towers."

"I came in the guard's van," said Captain Markham.

The youngest of the party turned round to me. "And did you come in the guard's van, Miss Kit ?" he said to me in a laughing undertone."

"I came—in the train," I said. I was not going to commit myself as to how or why I had come to Idleminster.

"Well, let's go into lunch," said my father.

He led the way into the hotel, and the next

minute I heard him making bland inquiries of the smart manageress who came out to meet us as to the accommodation they could give us for lunch.

"Oh, a private room, by all means," he said, "by all means."

So we were shown into a comfortable private room by the winsome manageress. My father remained at the door as we passed in, and I heard her say in reply to some inquiry, "Not more than a quarter of an hour. You would like sherry and bitters?" she said as she prepared to leave the room.

"Yes, certainly, certainly," he replied.

So in two minutes or so two waiters arrived, one carrying a large table-cloth over his arm, and the other a tray with sherry and bitters, while one ministered to the gentlemen the other began quickly and dexterously to lay the table for our benefit. It was then that I had my first chance of asking anything of Captain Markham.

"Look here," I said, edging up to him, and speaking very much under my breath, "what's going on here?"

"Well, there's a big sale of horses to-day, that's all. We've come over for that."

"Oh—oh—have you really? Are any of the others coming?"

"I should think all or most of them."

"Who is orderly officer for the day?"

"Greville."

"Oh! Do you know what time the next train comes in from Northtowers?"

"I haven't the least idea—yes I have though, I've got a little time-table in my pocket. Here you are, twenty-five minutes past one. That gives good time to have lunch and get to the sale yard before it opens."

Well, I could only possess my soul in patience and see what the next train should bring forth. I think that Captain Markham was just going to speak to me when one of the other men, with a glass of sherry and bitters in his hand, lounged up.

"Why, you haven't got any sherry and bitters, Miss Kit."

"Oh, I don't want any."

"What! Always got an appetite? That's lucky for you."

I hadn't an appetite, nor did I want one, but that was neither here nor there. He sat himself down on the top of the writing-table beside which I was sitting, and having swallowed his sherry and bitters at one gulp, he put his glass carefully on the table beside him.

"Are you after any particular bargain yourself, Miss Kit," he exclaimed, "or have you just come to keep the Colonel in countenance?"

Now this was a leading question, which it was exceedingly awkward for me to answer.

"I came," I said at last, "I—I—came—"

At this moment my father spoke to Captain Markham.

"I say, Markham, old chap, come here for a minute. Just look at this."

And Captain Markham did go there, and did just look at that, and I seized the opportunity to ask Mr MacPherson a question.

"Mr MacPherson," I said, "where is Mr Vancourt to-day?"

"Vancourt? He's gone to London."

"Oh, has he?" I made the remark in as careless a tone as I could summon up. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Miss Kit."

"Oh—I shouldn't have thought he would have cared to miss this sale."

"Well, between ourselves," said Mr MacPherson, "I don't think Georgey has much money to spare on extra gees—not even an extra tat. Anyway, he went to London by the twelve o'clock train — I saw him go."

I could not understand it. Georgey had gone to London! And without even apprising me of his plans! I tried in a helpless and wooden kind of way, for I was almost stunned by the turn of events, to remember once more his instructions for the day's doings. No, I had not mistaken him. I was to go to Idlemminster by the train leaving Northtowers at ten minutes past twelve. At Fordington he would be on the watch for me, and would join me, and we were

then to be quietly married, lunch in Idlemminster, and come quietly home again to await the eventuation of affairs. And Georgey had gone to London! At this point my father's voice broke in upon my thoughts.

"Come, let us get lunch over without losing any more time. Markham, you take that end of the table. Kit, you sit next to Markham."

A moment later we were all sitting round the table, and then Captain Markham was able to speak to me.

"Kit," he said in a very low voice, "I hope you don't blame me for what has happened. I—I couldn't very well help myself—I couldn't go back on you."

"No, no, I know it, I know it—so foolish and unreasonable of Dad to jump to conclusions like that—quite ridiculous."

"Yes, it's rather a pity," he said in a wistful tone, "unless you—unless you are prepared to go through with it, that is."

"I can't go through with it!" I exclaimed.

"Well, don't worry yourself about it; I'll give the Colonel a hint presently, only—what brought you to Idlemminster?"

"Miss Kit," said the man on my left at that moment, "did you ever see that old lady they call Poll Parrot?"

I turned round with a long breath of relief. "Oh,

yes, Mr Devenish, I have seen her many times. She's awfully quaint."

"Is she an out-and-out lunatic, or only half-and-half, so to speak."

"Only half - and - half, I think, because she's loose."

They laughed as if I had said something extremely clever, and as I did not want to have any further explanations just then with Captain Markham, I followed up the subject with avidity.

"Why, who told you anything about her? Has anything happened to her?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Mr Devenish replied; "the Marjoribanks were all talking about her yesterday. They spoke of her as quite a familiar object."

"So she is in Northtowers," I replied; "she has lived there for ever, and is one of the features of the place."

From the topic of the eccentric old lady who was known far and wide as Poll Parrott, the conversation was kept rolling as a tennis ball is sometimes kept up between clever players, and then my father created a sensation, for he suddenly rose to his feet.

"I do not know, my dear fellows," he began, "whether a small friendly lunch like this preceding a sale of horses is exactly the time one should choose to make speeches and to drink healths, but I am going to create a precedent and let you into a secret

which I am sure you will be very pleased to share with me. I am happy to be able to announce to you an engagement between my daughter and my friend Markham, and I will ask you, gentlemen, to charge your glasses to the full and pledge the prospective bride and bridegroom in bumpers, and no heel-taps."

CHAPTER IV

A PATCHED-UP AFFAIR

"When light is let in upon a mystery it often comes from a most unexpected direction."

I WAS so taken aback by my father's announcement that I literally could find no words in which even to deny the position in which I found myself. I looked up with astonishment at Captain Markham, who was, in his way, as much taken aback as I was in mine.

"Don't give the show away now," he murmured under his breath ; "it'll make the Colonel look such a fool if you do. We can explain matters afterwards—you can chuck me up, or anything you like."

So I sat there, blushing and paling by turns, with my eyes filled with most unwelcome tears, while hand-shakes and hard thumps on the back were showered upon my supposed *fiance*. Then my father, having no further mischief to make, pushed back his chair and announced that he thought it was time to set off for the sale yard.

"Old chap," I heard one of the men say to Captain Markham as we pushed back our chairs, "I had no

idea there was anything of this kind in the wind. How dark you have kept it all! By the way, you ought to make a speech. Sit down, gentlemen, sit down, we've had no speech from the bridegroom. Speech, speech! Come, you mustn't look hang-dog, you know, the gay and gallant bridegroom must play up to the part. Speech, man, speech!"

My father, with a well-satisfied laugh, sat down in his chair again, and in a moment every single man was once more in his seat. Only Captain Markham remained standing, and I had no choice but to sit down again myself. Then my supposed *fiancé* began to speak.

"Colonel Owen and gentlemen," he said, "on behalf of Miss Owen and myself, I beg to thank you very much for the kind manner in which you have drunk our healths, and wished us prosperity in the future. Our engagement is so recent, and we were so unprepared for this festivity, and more particularly for this kindness on your part, that I have not got a suitable speech by heart, but both for Miss Owen and myself I beg to thank you very much for your good wishes."

Then we all trooped away into the hall, and my father called for cabs in which to go to the scene of the sale.

"You'll bring Kit with you, of course," he said to Captain Markham.

"Yes, of course," said Captain Markham, quietly.

So I was put into a hansom, and Captain Markham followed me.

For a moment or two after we started I could not speak.

"My dear Kit, I hope you do not hold me responsible for this. I never was so taken aback in my life. Who was to expect that your father would go and publicly announce, before he was definitely sure, that we were engaged. I saw no use in denying it; it is a serious thing to make a fool of your commanding officer. Your father is a man who would never forgive it."

"It doesn't matter about my forgiveness, I suppose?"

"Oh—my dear girl—you haven't definitely given me an answer to the question I put to you more than a fortnight ago. I—I can get you out of it in a thousand ways."

"No, Captain Markham, you can't get me out of it, that's exactly what you can't do. My father is set on this marriage with you—it is as much almost as my life is worth to throw you over after having apparently promised to marry you. If you were to throw me over—"

"You can't expect me to do that."

"What do you expect me to do? Go through with it and marry you?"

"It would be the quickest way out, and the easiest," he said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"But I don't care for you—I don't care for you in that way."

"You've always been such a friend of mine, Kit ; why can't you like me in that way ? Don't think I'm trying to take advantage of you—I wouldn't do that of any woman in the world, let alone the woman I love. But you're in a tight corner ; the Colonel can be as unreasonable as any man I know. You're in a cleft stick, my poor child."

"I know, I know—but I don't care for you like that."

"Don't you think you could ?"

"No, I don't think I could."

"You're very hard-hearted, little Kit."

"No, that's just where you're wrong, I'm not hard-hearted. I *do* like you, but I don't like you like that—I don't think it's right to marry a man unless you are dreadfully in love with him. I hate being treated like this—bustled into a marriage—it isn't fair. You ought to tell my father the truth. Why can't you do that ? "

"Tell him the truth ! That you and I met by accident at Idleminster Station, and as we were talking he came up and mistook us for—for lovers ? Well, and what would your father's first question be ? "

"I don't know."

"I can tell you. He would ask you, What were you doing in Idleminster by yourself, without any

intimation to me? What brought you to Idleminster?"

I looked out over the horse's head for some seconds. In truth, this suggestion was a facer, for how could I answer such a question?

"From your manner," Captain Markham went on, "I imagine you are here in a way which would be well calculated to make him very angry. For instance, if you tell him you came over to shop, he will tell you that all the world knows people from Idleminster come to Northtowers for that purpose. If you tell him you have come over to lunch with someone, he will ask who. If you tell him you came over by yourself to enjoy a little solitude, and eat a meal at an hotel, he will say the sooner you have a husband to take care of you the better. Think, Kit. I am willing to do anything you like, I am willing to sacrifice myself in any way you like, short of dishonourably getting out of this engagement; but you must have a reasonable story to tell, and the pieces must fit."

"And if I—if I—oh, I'm afraid," I cried.

"Yes, I know you are afraid, I saw that in the station quite plainly. I did not know there was such a feeling between your father and you. I had an idea that he idolised you."

"So had I, Captain Markham, so had I."

"Well, then, what is to be done?"

"I don't know; I never was so afraid in my life."

"But you're not afraid of me?"

"I am, as a husband. Oh, I can't think what to do ; I'm frightened."

"It *is* a tight corner," he said quietly, "a very tight corner. I can't think what to do either. And pray, since when have you been afraid of your father ?"

"Oh, just lately ; he seemed so set on this marriage. I don't think it's altogether because you're so rich—"

"Augh ! I should hope not. I don't want a wife to please your father, I want a wife to please myself, a wife who'll be pleased to be my wife. I don't want to take you, Kit, under any other circumstances. For the moment the mistake has been made, we are committed to it, and we must dissemble. I see nothing for it but to let the affair go on for a few days, at the outside for a week or two, and then we must think of some decent excuse between us for breaking it off—unless," he added, and his voice dropped to a very tender tone—"unless you should change your mind."

"Oh, how can I change my mind ? One's mind isn't like a coat that one can turn inside out. How silly you are to suggest such a thing !"

"Yes, I suppose it is silly, but I didn't exactly suggest it ; at least, if I did, I didn't mean to hurt you in any way. By Jove ! Here we are at the yard. Hi, Cabby !" and he thrust his stick through the trap-door and told the cabman to drive straight on instead of turning into the yard.

"But they will expect us," I cried.

"It doesn't matter what they expect—we are engaged. We may as well take advantage of it while it lasts. Nobody will say anything, Kit."

So we drove on, past the sale yard, and along a quiet residential road.

"The question is," he said, "what are we going to do?"

"We can't do anything to-day, nor yet to-morrow. I have no choice but to let things remain where they are for the moment; but mind, clearly understand one thing, I'm not going to marry you, I'm not going to be cajoled, or driven, or coaxed into it. You've got me into this mess and you'll have to get me out of it."

He was leaning forward, with his arms resting on the arms of the hansom. "Kit," he said, "do you think that's quite just? *Did* I get you into this very tight corner?"

"No, perhaps you didn't; but whether it was your fault or whether it was mine makes very little difference to the main situation. The corner's a tight one, and I'm in it."

"And I'm in it too—don't you think I am?"

"Oh, perhaps—perhaps; and yet it doesn't matter to you, you have no one to bully you, you have to account to nobody but yourself. I—I am only a girl, I am not a free agent. I never was so miserable in my life."

"I don't think you need make yourself miserable, little Kit, we'll get out of it somehow."

I drew a long breath of relief, and sank back in my corner of the cab. He remained just as he had been, leaning forward, and resting his arms on the doors of the cab, and so we continued for some minutes. Then he looked back at me over his shoulder.

"Do you think, Kit, that it's very interesting, driving like this?"

"No, I don't."

"You see, we're taking a poor brute of a cab horse," he continued, "and we're using it for nothing. Shall we go back and see something of the sale?"

"I should like to."

"Then we will."

He thrust his stick through the trap-door and told the driver to go to the sale yard. And there we found the men of Ours with whom we had lunched, and some others who had come by a later train. Captain Markham elbowed a way through the crowd so that I might go to where my father was standing, and found me a seat on a rough bench close by.

"You'd better sit here, Kit," he said in a very proprietorial tone, "and put your feet on that bit of plank; this yard is as damp as a river."

So I sat there and watched the proceedings, the glossy-coated horses being run up and down, and I enjoyed myself as much as was possible under the

circumstances. We were watching for the last lot to be brought in when I overheard something that seemed to freeze the very blood in my veins. My father and some of the senior officers were to the right of my seat, which I shared with two other ladies, and to my left was a shifting, changing group of young men, all keen as mustard on the events of the day, and just as we were watching for the last lot one of them said, "Where's Georgey Vancourt to-day?"

The man to whom he spoke was one of Ours, and he gave a short laugh as he replied, "Oh, poor old Georgey's got himself into the devil of a mess."

"Oh!—you don't say so! What's he done?"

"Well, he's got a heavy affair of some kind on here, though he's kept as close as wax about it and won't let on to a single soul; and it seems that poor old Georgey has got tied up in some way to another girl. He thought he was just going to slope out of it and run the affair as he liked, but the girl's people got wind of it and he had a letter this morning giving him a solid week in which to go up and pull off the marriage. You can imagine Georgey's feelings!"

I sat quite still. "Imagine Georgey's feelings!" You can imagine mine!

CHAPTER V

YELLOW AND GREEN

“ ‘Yellow’s forsaken and green’s forsown,’ and surely the experience of these is the bitterest moment of any woman’s life.”

WHEN we reached home the first thing I saw was a letter lying on the hall table addressed to me, and as my father and Captain Markham were just behind I did not open it, but carried it in my hand into the drawing-room with me.

“ Well, come and wash your hands in my dressing-room,” I heard my father say, “ it’s really astonishing how the shortest railway journey—” and then his voice seemed to fade out of sight, as it were, and I heard no more. At that moment the tea-tray was brought in by Giffard.

“ There was a letter on the hall table for you, Miss— Oh, I see you have it. It was brought up by Mr Vancourt’s man ; he said it was most important.”

“ Thank you, Giffard. It’s all right,” I said.

“ Anything more, Miss ? ”

“ I think not.”

I had long since given up trying to make Giffard address me in any more correct fashion. Soldier servant he was, and soldier servant he would remain, excellent in every way, faithful as a dog, willing as a

willing horse. Left alone, I tore the letter open. It began without prefix.

“I am hoping this will reach you before you leave for Idlemminster. I am in the worst mess I have ever been in in my life. I believe the kindest thing is to ask you to forget me, and to forgive your devoted

“GEORGEY.”

I wondered, in a sort of flash, if he had been devoted to the other girl before I came to change his fancy, and even in the midst of my pain—and it was pain, mind you—I did not overlook the fact that he had neither given me up nor declared his intention of holding on to me. And then I opened the letter again. Ah!—there was the sound of men’s voices in the hall opposite. I thrust the letter into my pocket and began to busy myself over the tea-tray. My father and Captain Markham entered the room and came over to the fireplace, and I began to pour out tea.

“I am afraid you’ve got a chill, Kit,” said my father.

“A chill, Dad? Oh, no!”

“You look very nipped and pinched, not at all like a blooming young bride-to-be—and your hands are shaking.”

“My hands—oh, nonsense! I think, Dad, I might use the celebrated phrase of old General Gray.”

“Eh? What was that?”

"In such a case he would have said, 'You might put all my shakiness in your eye and be none the worse for it.' "

My father took his tea and helped himself liberally to sugar. "There, Markham, you see what you will have to look forward to—little spitfire! I hope you will be able to keep her in better order than ever I have done."

"Oh, come, come, Colonel, it's not for you to—"

And then he pulled up short and looked at me, and I, in spite of my general feeling of bewilderment and pain, laughed outright.

"No, you're quite right, Captain Markham, it's not for Daddy to cry 'stinking fish.' I'm surprised at you, Daddy. If you are so anxious to get rid of me you shouldn't do anything to frighten Captain Markham off."

My father laughed as if I had made the best joke in the world.

"I never believe," he said, "in glossing over a horse's faults when I want to sell. Far better tell the truth; it comes back upon you sooner or later if you don't."

I did not follow up the subject, but drank down my cup of tea and left the two men together.

Then I read Georgey's letter again, realising for the first time that he had not left any loophole of escape for himself, but had simply, unconditionally given me up. Well, he had given me up, and I, Kit

Owen, was the last girl in the world to try to keep a man to his bargain who wanted to be off it ; or if he didn't want to be off it, felt that it was politic to be off it. I truly do not know, looking back from my present standpoint, whether my heart or my pride suffered the greatest pain that evening. I could not understand his want of consideration in not making sure that I received the letter before starting from home for Idleminster. Of course he was not to know that half the regiment would be over in the town on that day, and yet—why did he not know?—yes, why did he not know? Why had he chosen that very day when there was more than a chance that so many of the men would be in that direction for our fateful excursion ? And then, not to make sure that the news reached me before I actually started—oh, it was cruel !

In the extraordinary chain of circumstances which had befallen me that day, one great mercy was vouchsafed to me. I did not break down. Of a truth, I never for one moment thought of shedding a single tear. Indeed, if I tell the truth, I was so angry that, I honestly believe, had I tried to weep, my tears would have been burnt up at the fountain head. How lucky it was, for I had not even begun to take off my outdoor garments when I heard my father's voice shouting from below.

“ Kit, Kit,” he said, “ shall you be long ? ”

I went to the top of the stairs, “ No. Why ? ” I asked.

"Because I have to go out."

"Well, you don't want me to go, do you?"

"Not at all, but Markham is here."

"Oh—I'll come down, I'll come down."

I hurried back into my room, removed my hat and my fur coat, and washed my hands. As I reached the hall I found my father just putting on his overcoat.

"Oh, there you are," he said ; "well, you'll look after Markham. By the bye," looking through the open door of the drawing-room, "you will dine with us to-night?"

Captain Markham came sauntering out. "Oh, thank you very much. Eight o'clock, I suppose?"

"Yes, in fact, you'd better take it as a standing invitation."

"Thank you very much, Colonel; very kind of you." Then he looked at my father very critically. "You've got your collar turned up, Colonel."

"Oh, have I? Put it down for me, will you? There's a good chap."

Thereupon he gently insinuated my father's under and overcoats into their proper set, and the next moment we were alone together.

I must tell you that our house in Northtowers was situated in a village about a quarter of a mile beyond the cavalry barracks. It was not by any means the great house of the place, but it was a fair-sized detached house standing right in the main

street of the village. Its owner happened to be an army man, at present in India, and as it had been the residence of his father and grandfather before him, it was quite unlike the general run of furnished houses. Its main feature was a very large entrance hall, which was furnished as a billiard-room, and in which, during the winter months, a great fire was kept blazing the whole of the day long. My father and I used it a good deal as our sitting-room, but latterly we had found that when the wind was in the east there were drafts in the hall which made it less desirable than it had been earlier in the season. So we had lately had tea served in the drawing-room. However, as Captain Markham closed the door after my father, I walked to the blazing fire and sat warming my hands. Then he came across the hall and stood beside me.

"Going to sit here?" he asked.

"I don't think so; it's rather cold here."

"Then let us go into the drawing-room."

So I turned and went into the drawing-room. He closed the door behind me, and as I settled myself in one big chintz-covered armchair beside the fire, he established himself in a corresponding one opposite to me.

"Now," he said in the tone of an ingenuous school boy, "we've got to talk matters over."

I felt that if I talked matters over at any length just then I should probably distinguish myself by

going into raging hysterics—I had never done such a thing in my life, perhaps because the necessity for such a course had never arisen, still, there is never any knowing what one might be able to do in any given circumstances, and I felt that just then I could not risk any further strain upon my nerves.

“Don’t you think, Captain Markham,” I said, “that we might leave it for to-day?”

“I’m quite willing to leave it for ever if you wish,” he replied, his voice taking a serious tone at once.

“I didn’t mean that; but you know perfectly well that all this was sprung upon me; I had no thought of such a thing.”

“And yet you have been thinking it over for a fortnight.”

“Yes, I have been thinking of it; but all the same, when I got up this morning—and when you got up too—we had no idea that we should be ostensibly engaged before lunch time.”

“Not ostensibly engaged,” he said, “we *are* engaged.”

“I’m tired,” I said, “I think I’d like to go to bed for a week. I don’t want to turn things over in my mind, or think things out, or anything like that. I just want somehow to be quiet for a little.”

“Poor little soul, it was sprung upon you, wasn’t it. And perhaps I do find it a little difficult to be really sympathetic towards you. You see, you could

only quite understand me, and I could only quite understand you if our positions were absolutely reversed — and then we should be as far off from understanding each other as ever."

I leaned my head back against the cushions, my brain whirling in spite of itself. I suppose he saw that I was very tired, for he suggested in a casual kind of way that he had better be going, "Particularly as I am coming back to dinner," he said half apologetically. "You see, Kit, I couldn't get out of it."

"No, I see you couldn't."

"If I had pretended, or made believe, or suggested that I was not keen on coming back to dinner, of course it would have given the show away entirely."

"It doesn't matter—your coming to dinner, I mean."

"I hope not ; but I can see that I am making you miserable, and that's not a very happy position for me."

I did not say anything, for, of a truth, I had nothing to say, and he put out a cool, firm hand and took hold of my limp and nerveless fingers.

"Poor little girl," he said, "you're cold and run down, and altogether sick. Don't let all this worry you. I don't, I confess, see my way clear to helping you out at this moment. Let it all rest a few days ; they can't eat us, and they can't marry us against our will. There's only one thing, Kit, that, for your own sake, you must do."

"What's that?" I said, opening my eyes.

"You must drop calling me 'Captain Markham.' "

"Oh, I simply couldn't."

"My dear child, you *must*, for your own sake."

"What difference can it make?"

"Well, it makes this difference. If we were really engaged, instead of only being engaged in a make-believe technical sort of fashion, you'd never dream of addressing me in such a formal manner—and I wouldn't stand it if you did."

"And what shall I call you?"

"You'd have to call me 'Dick,' of course."

"Dick—oh, it's a nice enough name. If you don't mind I'll call you Dick—when I don't forget."

"You mustn't forget; you can't afford to forget."

"Very well, I'll remember. It's very good of you; I find you very considerate—Dick."

I think he reddened a little, but it might have been the play of the firelight upon his features. He was sitting rather forward in his chair, leaning his elbows on his knees. I was sitting well back in mine when Giffard came into the room.

"A telegram, Miss," he said. "Any answer?"

I took the flame-coloured envelope and tore it open.

"No, Giffard, no, there is no answer," I said. And then I read the message again; it was brief.

"To Colonel Owen, The Moor House, North-towers. Will you speak to me on the telephone, number 1060, immediately on receipt of this? Very important.—GEORGE VANCOURT."

I crumpled the paper together.

"Not bad news, I hope," said Dick, turning his head.

"Not at all. I have to speak to somebody on the telephone."

Then it flashed across my brain that Georgey would recognise that it was my voice—or, at least, that it was a woman's voice, and would not state his business. I turned round to Captain Markham.

"This is a telegram from Mr Vancourt. He wants to speak to my father on business. I suppose it is something connected with the regiment. I wish you would see what it is."

So we went into the hall where the telephone was fixed, and rang up number 1060, and this was our half of the conversation which ensued :—

"Are you there? Are you there? Number 1060. Mr Vancourt? Yes, are you there? Yes, yes. No, he's out. Who is it? Markham. Oh, yes, I'll tell him anything you like. Oh—that's a pretty kettle of fish. Oh—I quite understand. Yes—bless my soul—Saturday morning? That is squaring things up with a vengeance. I hope you'll be very happy, old chap. Well, I'm dining here at eight—I can tell the Colonel

all about it, and get him to speak to you then. God only knows where he is now. Will that do? I see—then I'll ring you up here at the same number—say about a quarter past eight, or as near eight as possible. Yes, yes—that'll be better. My best wishes, old boy. Sure to be all right about your leave, etc. Good-bye."

Then he dropped the receiver and turned to me with a laugh in his eyes. "What do you think, Kit, Georgey Vancourt's going to be married on Saturday morning!"

CHAPTER VI

I BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND

"There is no guard so effective as a bold attack. This may sound paradoxical, but in affairs of finesse it is absolutely true."

So that was the explanation of it all. Georgey Vancourt was going to be married, and the conversation I had overheard in the sale yard conveyed the absolute truth, neither more nor less. I suppose the heroine of a novel would have fallen on the floor in a dead faint, and, so to speak, given the whole show away on the spot. But I did nothing of the kind—I was much too angry. I received the news with an air of cool indifference, or what I tried to make such.

"Really! Isn't it rather sudden?"

"Oh, awfully sudden. Poor old Georgey's got himself into some terrible mess; they were all talking about it in the barracks this morning."

"A mess! Oh!"

"Yes, he was engaged to a girl, but he wanted to get out of it, so he just shunted it, see? Then he saw some other fair charmer at this end, and before he was well on with her, the father of the first damsel comes down like a thousand of bricks on

poor old Georgey, and gives him exactly a week to pull it off in."

"Who is the girl?"

"I don't think it matters who the girl is, but what is more to the point is that she has a particularly militant father, and two extremely out-size brothers, who'd think no more of knocking Georgey into a cocked hat than squashing a fly against a window pane."

"A nice prospect of happiness!"

"Oh, well, I daresay Georgey will be as happy as he deserves to be, though that's not saying much for his future. There's not much harm in Georgey Vancourt, but, on the other hand, there's not much good. He's an unreliable sort of chap; I don't think the girl's got much of a bargain."

And this was the man I had left my home that very morning to marry! And that was the opinion of my despised *fiance*—that the girl wasn't getting much of a bargain, and that Georgey was a poor, unreliable sort of chap! Well, it was a funny world, and I was proving it up to the hilt.

I presently found myself back in the drawing-room again, and alone, Captain Markham having gone away with no more familiarity than telling me to go in out of the cold.

"Captain Markham"—he was quite right, I must learn to call him by his name, and his name was Dick. Well, I must learn to call him Dick, think of him as Dick. It would be difficult, because for

years I had never called him by anything but his surname, Mr, and, later, Captain Markham. You see, we were really soldiers in our regiment, and I had never been brought up to treat its officers in the curious hail-fellow-well-met style that I occasionally read of. I must learn to call him Dick ; yes, and I felt somehow as if I would rather that Georgey Vancourt were not quite aware of my exact circumstances on this most momentous day of my life.

It was a little after seven when my father came home.

" Hullo, Kit, not gone to dress ? " he said.

" Not yet, Dad."

" How long's Markham been gone ? "

" Some little time. By the way," I said carelessly, or what sounded like it, " by the way, Dad, Georgey Vancourt rang you up on the telephone just now, and Captain Markham answered it."

" Oh, he wants more leave, I suppose, young beggar."

" Yes, pretty long leave, I think ; he's going to be married."

" Georgey Vancourt ? Good heavens ! Who'll get married next in the regiment, I wonder. Why, the young duffer hasn't got enough to keep himself."

" All the same, you'd better see what he wants."

" What number is he at ? "

" Oh, I remember, 1060."

I followed my father to the telephone, and stood

by while another half of a conversation reached my ears.

"Are you there? Are you there? Are you there? Mr Vancourt there? Yes, Mr *Vancourt*, I said—Oh—oh. Yes, tell him I'm ready to speak to him—Colonel Owen." "Gone upstairs to fetch the young beggar," said my father to me. Then the bell sounded again. "Hullo! Is that you, Vancourt? Oh, yes. No, you didn't keep me waiting. I hear great news, er—er—" "How shall I put it?" he said to me. "You wanted to see me—at least—Well? Oh, rather quick work, wasn't it? No? Been engaged some time? Oh, well, I suppose it's all right. Hope the young lady's got shot in the locker. Oh, she has, has she? A good many shots? Oh, I'm glad of that. Can't have too many in the service. You want leave. Well, since you're so pressed for time, I'll put it through to headquarters for you. N—o, I shouldn't think there would be any difficulty about it. Shall I be up in town on Saturday morning? No, I'm afraid not, my boy, I'm afraid not. Come if I could, of course, but Harcourt is on leave, and that makes my absence impossible. Good-bye, good-bye."

"Going to marry a girl with money. Now, can you figure to yourself a girl with money marrying Georgey Vancourt?"

I—I fairly gasped. This was another man's opinion about Georgey—my husband that was to

have been—an unbiassed opinion, since there was no question of his marrying me, and never had been, so far as my father was concerned. I slipped away with an excuse that it was time to dress for dinner, and went upstairs running, two steps at a time, and bounced into my room in anything but a broken-hearted manner. I was broken-hearted, mind you, something worse than broken-hearted, I felt full of moral proud-flesh. Oh, yes, if my heart had sustained a wound, the blow to my pride was much sorer and harder to bear. Well, I wouldn't show the white feather. After all, my engagement to—Dick had been publicly announced before there had been a breath afloat in the regiment about Georgey's marriage. He would be sure to ask, no fear of that, and the others would be equally sure to tell him all about the lunch at Idleminster, and about the announcement of my engagement to Dick. I—I would keep it up. I did not know how long I could hang out with Dick, how long he would be willing to let things remain *in statu quo*, but in any case I would not show the white feather to Georgey, and I would never let him know that I had gone over to Idleminster for the express purpose of being married to him. I knew that he had actually had the banns put up, and that he had paid for rooms for both of us in the parish in which we were supposed to be living for the three Sundays on which the banns had been cried; and I knew that he had got the wedding ring, for I had tried it on.

The ring he could use for the other girl, but I was afraid that the money spent in Idleminster would prove a dead loss.

It was not likely that we should have any explanation, he and I, for he would not be back in Idleminster till his marriage was an accomplished fact. They might be away a couple of months. I wondered whether I should be able to keep it up with Dick during that time. I felt that I should have a difficult task to keep Captain Markham dangling long enough at the end of my string. I knew that to keep him at all I must give him a little encouragement, and, oh! it would be difficult, very, very difficult. But at all hazards I must be engaged when Georgey brought his wife back to the regiment from their honeymoon.

That night I chose the prettiest dress in my wardrobe, a *crêpe de chine* of delicate shell-pink, made still more soft by trimmings of *mousseline de soie* of the same shade.

"Why, my dear child," was Dick's greeting to me when I went down into the drawing-room, where he was waiting, "you look like a blooming, half-opened rose. I've never seen you in that gown before."

"No? But I think you have."

"I don't remember it, and I remember most of your gowns," he said in his kindest tones.

He had taken my hand without any exhibition of affection, and held it as an intimate friend might have done.

"Pink is quite your colour, Kit," he said, "pink and that soft dove-grey that you are so fond of wearing."

I drew my hand gently away and moved a little nearer to the fire.

"I'm glad you like it, Dick," I said.

I did not look at him, but stood there warming my hands and making desultory conversation until my father appeared. He came in with an elaborate display of precaution such as was quite unnecessary, and was evidently relieved when he found that we were behaving like ordinary beings. When we were seated at table he plunged into the subject of Georgey Vancourt's approaching marriage.

"What do you think of that young beggar Vancourt?"

"Going to be married!" said Dick.

"Going to be married," said my father; "the most feather-headed, unreliable young ass in the regiment—or out of it, for that matter—and going to marry a girl with dibs! Figure to yourself," continued my father, "a girl with plenty of dibs throwing herself away on George Vancourt!"

"You never had any opinion of Vancourt?" said Dick, quietly.

"Never," said my father, "never! A young ass, always doing the wrong thing, unstable as water, no credit, no advantage to the regiment in having him in it; always shielding him, always making excuses

for him—oh! *can* you figure to yourself a girl with dibs throwing herself away on *that!*”

And this was the man that I had set out that very morning to marry in secret! Fortunately the two men did not notice me. I sat at the head of the table in my elaborately-carved oak chair, and leaned back watching them, my hands resting on the richly-carved arms, my head well supported by the carved oak behind me.

“I don’t mind telling you now,” said my father, “that I always kept a particularly sharp eye on Georgey with regard to *that* young woman.”

“To me!”

I threw as much scorn into my voice as my dramatic instincts would permit.

“Well, you can turn up your nose, and you can say ‘To me’ in a tone as if you were an outraged empress; but, saving your presence, one never knows what vagaries a young girl will be up to. Goodness knows, you’ve had a few, as most girls, and I consider,” he went on, addressing himself to my *fiance*, “that Kit’s head is as well screwed on as that of any young woman in the three kingdoms. But when it comes to falling in love— Well, as I say, I always kept a particularly sharp eye on young Georgey.”

I allowed myself to smile, or, it would be more correct to say, a smile spread itself over my features. Captain Markham laughed outright.

“I don’t think, sir,” he said, not looking either at

my father or me, but concentrating all his attention on the crumbs of bread upon his plate, "that Kit is so particularly keen on matrimony as most of the girls of her age."

"Well, all the better for you."

"Oh, quite so." And then he too grinned a little under his moustache, and I could not help wondering what his precise thoughts were; I knew they did not tally with mine.

It occurred to me just then that if I took no part in this conversation, except that of denial of any interest in Georgey Vancourt, I should be rather giving myself away. So I cast a miniature bomb-shell on to the table.

"I don't agree with you," I said, "that Georgey Vancourt is such a very unimportant person in the regiment."

"Eh?" said my father.

"Vancourt?" said Dick.

"Yes, Vancourt. Georgey of that ilk, as the story books always call it. He mayn't be up to much, he may be the blithering little fool that Dad wants to make out, but he has personality enough to make you two, who *are* persons of importance in the regiment, talk about him the whole of dinner-time."

"Which," said Dick, "is a direct snub for you and me, sir."

"Well," I went on, "you have discussed him, turned him inside out, flayed him alive, withered

him, and left him spread out on the dissecting-table. You have scarified the girl with dibs who has cast the glory of her golden halo round Georgey Vancourt's brow. But," and I addressed myself pointedly to my father, "you have even admitted that this nincompoop, this ne'er-do-weel, this scamp with scarce sufficient vertebræ to make him a scamp, was sufficiently dangerous for you to keep your eye open to make sure that his intentions did not shape themselves in my direction. I don't know how you understand this case, but it seems to me that Georgey Vancourt is sufficiently important to both of you."

"And now," said my father, without replying directly to me, but speaking to Dick, "now you perceive the kind of gridiron on which you are going to turn and turn and turn about during the rest of your life."

CHAPTER VII

PRESSURE

"Indefinite arrangements allow of no standing still."

WEDNESDAY came and went, and Thursday morning dawned. I breakfasted in quite the usual way with my father, and during the course of the morning I took my way, walking into the town. The day was bitterly cold, for we were enjoying one of those black, bleak frosts which make the road as hard as iron, and keep the hunters eating their heads off in the stables. I met ever so many people I knew, and received a good many congratulations on my engagement. I accepted them with as gay a demeanour as I could assume, and at last I finished my shopping, excepting that I had need to order some cakes for the afternoon, when I was expecting some people to tea. I have told you about the little shop in King Street, and thither I bent my footsteps. My cakes were soon ordered, and I was just counting the money out of my purse with which to pay for them, when the door quietly opened and Georgey Vancourt walked into the shop. I was so astonished that I dropped the money, and it fell upon the tessellated pavement with a jingle. I stooped in my confusion to pick up my coins, and

he stooped too, and the young lady came round from behind the counter.

"Look here," he said in my ear, "I want to talk to you. Come in here; let me give you a cup of chocolate as an excuse."

"No, thank you, I don't want a cup of chocolate; I should spoil my lunch, and I'm in rather a hurry, I don't think that I can stay. Won't you come up to the house and have tea this afternoon? I have ever so many people coming."

"Tea!" he said impatiently; and the young lady behind the counter, with a consideration which I think was the outcome of both tact and training, passed into the inner room so as to be out of earshot.

"I came down from town on purpose to see you. Don't you understand?"

"No, I don't. I hear that you are going to be married. I congratulate you with all my heart. I hear that the lady is young and beautiful."

"She may be young and beautiful and rich, and possess every virtue under the sun, but she is not you."

"No, she is not me. But I assure you, Mr Vancourt, that I really am in a hurry."

"You are angry with me."

"No."

"That miserable morning," he went on, not taking any heed of my disclaimer, "that miserable morning when I was to have met you, did you go?"

"Where?"

"To Idleminster."

"Oh—to Idleminster? You didn't really think I was going to Idleminster to be married on the sly, did you?"

"I did."

"Oh—I got your note."

"In time?"

"In plenty of time. But things are so altered with both of us, we'll not discuss it. I really thought, indeed I'm not quite sure now that you were not playing an elaborate hoax upon me."

"Hoax! hoax!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a little practical joke. Oh, how you would have had the laugh of me, particularly as you knew you were going away to arrange your marriage."

"But I wasn't."

"But you are going to be married."

"I know it—I know I am going to be married—I told you so. I've—I've got to. I can't get out of it; I'm the most wretched man on earth this day."

"Really! Well, I'm sorry—I'm sorry for the girl. Does she know how wretched you are?"

"She knows—what she knows."

"Ah, now you have spoken. And now I must go, for I am driven for time."

I made a sign to the driver of a passing cab, who looked into the shop on the chance of a possible fare, and gathering up my cakes I whisked out with-

out any more formal leave-taking, and had jumped into the cab and had given the address before the astonished young man could make any attempt to follow me.

I was not sure that I behaved with wisdom, still less with dignity. My only desire had been to ward off a too detailed explanation, to ward off an explanation of any kind ; and I had succeeded in that, in whatever else I had failed. All the way, as we rattled along the narrow, noisy streets and then along the broader roads leading countrywards, a sort of shamed recognition came to me that my father and Dick had been right in their estimation of Georgey Vancourt ; that he was all and worse than they had thought him ; that he was a poor, unreliable creature. And I—I pitied the girl with the dibs as much as I despised myself for having been so blind in the past. But I *had* avoided an explanation.

That evening at dinner my father brought home the news that Georgey Vancourt had been in North-towers.

" If you believe me, that young beggar came all the way from town to fetch his clothes. There's a chap with a man-servant who knows every stitch he's got, and the young fool must come all the way down to fetch his clothes himself."

" Did you see him ? " I asked.

" Oh, Lord, yes. He came to lunch at mess."

" Oh, did he ? Has he gone back again ? "

"Oh, yes, went back by the five o'clock train. I've got his leave all right, and they're going to Italy, if you please—Italy, with the idea of studying art!"

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Yes, the girl with the dibs is artistic, so it seems. Such a queer thing that a girl with artistic instincts should want to marry Georgey Vancourt. Ah—you can never tell."

"What's her name, Dad?" I asked.

"There, now, he did tell me. It's not a name of much account, it's—dear me, now, what *is* her name? Impossible sort of name—Smiler or Smiley—by Jove, it's Smiley!"

And so it proved to be. On the Monday following I saw in the *Morning Post* that Georgey Vancourt had been duly tied up to Miss Emmeline Smiley. The announcement set forth that she was the only daughter of Thomas Smiley, Esq., of Belgrave Square and Threadneedle Court, E.C. So that was where the dibs came in! Well, I hoped he would be happy with his Emmeline, and I hoped with equal sincerity that the unfortunate Emmeline would be happy with the lover of her choice. But I was doubtful, very doubtful.

From that time forward I must confess that Georgey Vancourt did not occupy my thoughts at all, excepting that I was particularly keen that he should not imagine that I was wearing the willow

for him. I had no means of finding out if he had learned of my engagement during his brief visit to the regiment. Dick never mentioned him, and I never found an opportunity for asking the question. I saw the other officers from time to time, but not one of them mentioned Georgey's name. I heard from my father that the regiment had sent him a wedding present, but that none of them had felt compelled to make it a particularly handsome one—as he put it, "just enough to save their bacon and do the decent thing." And, as I said, Dick never mentioned him.

The days went by, those winter days which are so entirely delightful in good quarters in such a city as Northtowers, and with everyone came some fresh and special pleasure. I had a lovely time, with all the advantages of a girl engaged to make a splendid marriage, and none of the disadvantages of having to be too considerate of the feelings or too much under the bondage of my *fiancé*. If only it could have gone on for ever I think I should have been absolutely content, if not absolutely happy. And Dick was very good. He never once made the smallest suggestion either of hurrying me or of cooling off, and it was from my own father that the first awkwardness of my engagement arose.

It happened one night that Dick was dining with us previous to going on to the theatre, where the regiment had a bespeak-night. The conversation

happened to turn upon the question of leave. It began by Dick's asking whether we were going to Owen's Rest or not.

"Well, that depends," said my father. "Personally, before your affair with Kit came on, I had fully made up my mind that we would go South this year. I'm glad you mentioned it, for I've had a tremendously good offer for Owen's Rest."

"For the winter?"

"Yes, right up to the end of the hunting season—that is to say, to the end of March."

"From now?"

"Yes, from a week hence. Most desirable tenant—whacking good rent—help to pay for this young damsel's trousseau."

I saw Dick's eyebrows go up, and the corners of his mouth go down.

"I was going to speak to you about it. Shall you want to be married from Owen's Rest, or from London, or from here?"

For a moment I could scarcely breathe. I waited with my eyes fixed on my plate and my mouth hidden by my clasped hands, for I was rude enough to be resting my elbows on the table. I waited in an agony of suspense for what Dick would say.

"If it were a question for immediate settlement," he said, "I should say that London would be the most convenient. Everybody's friends will go to London for a wedding, even in the hunting season.

But up to now Kit and I have not discussed the question of when we are going to be married."

My father never looked at me. His eyes turned upon Dick with a look of consternation that was neither more nor less than ludicrous.

"Oh," he said, in queer, dashed tones, "I suppose you're not by any chance thinking of cooling off, either of you?"

"I am certainly not, but as for Kit here, she is such a remarkably cool young person that I don't think she possibly could cool off any more—not without turning into a pillar of salt, so to speak."

"Thank you," I put in at this point.

For answer my *fiancé* bowed almost to the level of the table, and said, in his most imperturbable tones, "Not at all, I assure you. But," he went on to my father, "I don't think I should lose the chance of a good let, if you care about going anywhere else—that is to say, because if we were to make up our minds to be married as soon as the banns could be read out we could be married in London, and we should get a better array of wedding presents."

"Dick," I said, "you are a mercenary wretch."

"Not at all. I have, during the last ten years, bestowed such a crop of wedding presents that I am looking forward to the harvest thereof with considerable interest and anticipation."

I was not in love with him, no, I was perfectly

sure of that ; I had never been so far from being in love with anybody in my life ; I did not admire him—I don't think I even liked him, but I was bound to admit to my unruly self that he was a man, and a contrast to Georgey Vancourt.

We had no time for further discussion, for Giffard came in to tell us that the brougham was at the door, and we tucked ourselves into it, for it was only a *coupé*, and Dick sat on the little seat opposite to us. He would have been much more comfortable in a cab, but it was difficult to get cabs so far out of the town as we lived, and he declared that he preferred it to driving down in solitary state. We all went to supper at the barracks afterwards, and my father and I did not get home till nearly two o'clock in the morning. But we were not so late that my father was able to put a very pointed and a very trenchant question to me.

"I say, Kit," he said, as we turned out of the barrack gates, "why are you and Markham holding off?"

I felt my cheeks go scarlet, but the merciful dimness of the *coupé* hid them from his keen observant eyes.

"Oh, we've not been engaged very long, Dad."

"Oh, haven't you? Why, when I had been engaged to your mother three days I insisted on having the wedding-day fixed."

"Oh, yes, but you are such a very impetuous person, a direct contrast to Captain Markham."

"You always call him Captain Markham."

"No, I usually call him 'Dick,' but it is hard to get out of the habits of a lifetime."

"Well, when is it to come off—this wedding?"

"I don't know. Being engaged is the best part of it. It isn't as if we were a hundred miles away."

"I'm not so sure that it would not be better if you were a hundred miles away—for Markham at all events."

"Oh, nonsense! 'Don't make a man dissatisfied with a good place.' It's the worst policy in the whole world. We'll get married, Dad, later on, by and by."

Then I turned and peered at my father through the darkness, which was but little illuminated by the lamps outside the carriage.

"I say, Dad, you've put a thought into my head. Why are you so anxious that I should be married and done for? Am I such a burden on you that you want to get rid of me?"

"No—no, indeed, I should like you and Markham to take up your quarters at the Moor House. When we leave this I don't know that I sha'n't go back into barracks. But what was the idea that you said I had put into your head?"

"I thought perhaps you might be thinking of getting married yourself."

"Well, I might be," he said quietly.

Something seemed to rush over my whole body, something that turned my blood to fire and my heart to water, a fierce wave of fury, indignation, injured pride—oh, I can't express my feelings. But my father was unaware of the tumult of tempestuous emotion that had taken possession of me ; he went on speaking, not knowing what a bomb-shell his remark had been.

“ Can you never realise,” he said, “ what life has been to me since your mother was taken away ? ”

“ Oh, yes.”

“ Well, Kit, you have filled her place in a way that is absolutely wonderful, but you and I are not of the same generation ; men and women want to be in the same decade to be really sympathetic to each other. That has always been one of my fixed beliefs. It's a perfectly natural thing that you should be married and in a home of your own. It's a perfectly unnatural thing that I, at my age—not yet five-and-forty—should be to all intents and purposes alone in the world. I may be going to marry again, but, to put it plainly, it is contingent upon your being settled in a home of your own.”

“ And have you arranged things—settled everything ? ”

“ Yes, contingent upon my being alone. I told you not very long ago that I was in a hole. Well, Kit, darling, I think you know me well enough to know that I am not the sort of man who gets into a

hobble on his own account. The boy had a let-down—got gambling with men older and richer than himself. I've had to sell out all sorts of things to pay it. I've never contemplated letting Owen's Rest before, but it will help me over the crisis. Now you understand why I'm thinking of remodelling my very lonely life, and why I was so anxious that you should not throw away such a chance of a good marriage as you are going to make."

I—I couldn't speak. I looked out into the dark and lonely road and choked. At last I found one word to say.

"If mother—"

"Kit, Kit," he said, "if you love me—and I know you do—don't talk to me about your mother."

CHAPTER VIII

A FIRESIDE TALK

"We often hear extollations of men who carry things with a rush, but there is generally more likelihood of success in the waiting game."

I THINK I may safely say that I spent the morning of the day following my explanation with my father bracing myself up for the interview I knew I must have with my *fiancé*. Instinct told me that when we met again he would revert to my father's words during dinner the previous evening. And surely enough, when he came in the afternoon, as he did about tea time, he went boldly into the subject concerning which I was quaking. Not that he rushed it—not a bit of it. He came in and remarked pleasantly that he was glad he was in time for tea, for he was dreadfully thirsty and had had a very indifferent lunch.

"I see you've got muffins."

"Yes, we've got muffins, also a tea cake."

He sat down in the chair opposite to me and went stolidly through an excellent tea, and when, after his third cup, he declined any more, he remarked that he felt very much the better for it. And then I told him that he could have a cigarette if he liked. He

thanked me, and took advantage of the permission, but, all the same, he never finished that cigarette.

"I wanted to say something to you," he began in a half hesitating kind of way.

"Yes. About what?"

"Well, about what your father was saying at dinner last night."

"And he was saying?"

"About our future plans. Don't you think we ought to consider the general effect of our conduct on other people?"

"As how?"

"Well, you see, Kit, I haven't forgotten that you were shoved into this business. You never meant to marry me, did you?"

"Perhaps I didn't."

"There's no perhaps about it—either you did, or you didn't," he said quietly.

"Well, I didn't."

"If I had let you go on without any interference from your father, you would have said no?"

"I daresay I should."

"You know you would. But there's one thing I must say, Kit."

"And that is?"

"Simply this, that whether you choose to take me or leave me, I want you to know, and to believe, that in a sense our engagement was as much sprung upon me as upon you."

"But you wanted to marry me?"

"Of course, but I did not want to force myself upon you against your will, and I don't want to force myself on you now. It never occurred to me that your father was going to take that course; I can't think how he came to mistake us so entirely."

"No; but he did mistake us, and that's quite enough for both of us, isn't it?"

"Yes, in a way it is. But the question is, What are we going to do?"

"How do?"

I felt my voice somehow going far away—miles away, and a curious sort of whirl took possession of my brain.

"I don't understand you, Dick," I said.

"Well, we—that is to say, I said nothing that day at Idleminster, merely to stop remarks being made, to prevent comment, to ward off awkward questions. We didn't want your father to know that he had so completely sprung a mine upon us."

"No."

"And so we agreed that we would say nothing. But now a time has come when one of us must say something."

"Why?"

"Don't you think your father has already said something? Don't you think he's becoming impatient? He thinks it most extraordinary that I

should be engaged to you and make no effort to get you to—to—er—name the wedding-day!"

"I know, I know."

"Well, Kit, to put it in plain words, your father smells a rat!"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, he knows all is not fair and square between us."

"How should he know?"

"How shouldn't he know? Don't you think that if you were as much in love with me as I am in love with you we should have fixed the day long ago? Don't you think we should be just on the eve of our marriage, if, indeed, we had not actually pulled it off in good earnest?"

"Perhaps."

"Oh, my dear child, there's no perhaps about it, it's a certainty, a dead certainty. Well," with a short, quick sigh, "it's no use going into that question. The question we have got to decide is, what are we going to do about it?"

Now, what could I do? I knew that my father would never forgive me if I deliberately jilted Captain Markham. I knew that there was the gravest necessity for not jilting him, and yet I had to say something. And there he was, sitting in the big armchair just opposite to mine, resting his elbows on his knees, and looking at me with all his soul in his blue eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" I said at last, in absolute desperation.

"Oh, Kit, you know perfectly well what I want you to do. I want you to marry me. I—am I so hateful to you?"

"Oh, no."

"You've seen a lot of me these last few weeks. Is the idea of marriage still so distasteful to you? Don't you think anything could ever make you like me a little?"

"Oh, yes; I like you very much. You're not distasteful to me; that's a horrid way of putting it."

"I haven't forced myself on you, I've been patient—God knows how I've done it!—but I *have* done it; even you will admit that. By Jove! I haven't even given you an engagement ring."

"No, you haven't."

"Would you have liked me to?"

"Well, I thought it rather odd under the circumstances."

"Did you? Well, that's an oversight that can soon be remedied. I didn't think you would like to wear a ring of mine while you were only playing at being engaged to me. Look here, Kit, I won't hurry you, I won't do anything to upset you, but is it going on, this engagement, or are we to look for a way out of it?"

"Well, can you suggest a way out of it?" I ventured to say.

"I? Oh, yes! You can throw me over at any moment you like."

Now that was just what I could not do; but, on the other hand, I could hardly explain it to him.

"Can't you suggest another way?" I said at last.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I really can't."

"Couldn't you throw me over?"

"No, I could hardly do that; it would mean leaving the regiment, and all sorts of things. It's hardly fair to ask me."

"Then what shall we do?"

"Well," he said, "there's one other thing I could suggest."

"Well?"

"Well, I suggest that you run away with somebody else."

"But I don't want to run away with anybody else."

"Oh!—then that would be rather difficult, wouldn't it? Well, then, there's only one thing to do."

"And that is?"

"To let it go on as it is."

"That's very good of you, Dick," I said humbly, "I'm awfully obliged to you. How long will you let it go on for?"

"Oh, well, of course it's only putting off the evil day, it's only a putting on of time. So far as I am concerned, we can let it go on as long as we can throw dust in your father's eyes."

"I don't think Daddy's the sort of person who is taking any when dust is about," I said in a rather forlorn tone.

"I suppose you wouldn't like to take the other alternative?"

"And that is?"

"To let affairs come to their natural conclusion, to let the engagement ripen into marriage. I would be very good to you—I think you would come to like me in time."

For a moment my breath was almost taken away by the magnitude of his offer. Here was a man who was quite the show man of the regiment, with thirty thousand a year, humbly entreating me to marry him as if I were doing him a favour! I think what astonished me most at this juncture was that I was so little in love with him. I felt sure that if I had been reading about him in a novel, I should have been most indignant with the heroine for not being over head and ears "gone and done for." Well, in real life it always seems to be like that. And there was Dick, the Faithful, still leaning forward, with desperate anxiety written on every line of his usually imperturbable face.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think it's awfully good of you," I cried. "I'm sure that Dad would never forgive me if I did such a thing as throw any man over, he has such a horror of

anything of the kind. But I feel as if you are being cheated."

"In what way?"

"Well, out of your proper due."

"Never mind, I'm quite content; we'll leave all that part of it to take care of itself. In any case, I'd rather have your friendship than the love of any other woman I ever saw in my life."

"Yes, but it's a poor exchange; I don't care for you a little bit in that way."

"As long as you don't care for anybody else in that way, I don't mind—oh, no, that's not true—I do mind, I should mind. But I mean that I am willing to take you on those terms—on any honourable terms—and if I can help it you shall never know what it is to repent having given yourself into my keeping."

His manner was so simple and earnest that I felt the hot tears rush into my eyes with a great gush of feeling. Why couldn't I care for this man? I felt a burning flush of shame when I thought that I had been really in love with Georgey Vancourt—Georgey Vancourt, who had got me into the worst hole that I had ever been in in my life—who had sacrificed me coolly and deliberately when he found himself in an awkward corner.

"Do you think," I said, "that we shall have to be married just yet?"

"There's no 'have to be' about it. We will be

married how and when and where it suits your Majesty's convenience."

"Yes, but still I have to think of you a little, you've been so good to me."

"I can't prove the real depth of my goodness, as you call it, until we are married," he said, laughing outright. "But since there's no one else, I don't see why you should ever repent ; and you never shall, Kit, if I can help it. Then shall we say this day two months, or this day six weeks ? We have been engaged two months, you know."

"Not quite."

"Well, getting on that way. I don't want to rush you, don't think that ; it's wholly and solely because I want to do the wisest and best that I can for you—and for myself too," he added. "Then I may tell the Colonel that we've settled matters ?"

"Oh, yes," I said, "everything."

"Well, I don't know that we've settled everything," he said slowly ; "in fact, there's just one thing that I do want to ask you."

CHAPTER IX

HALF ASHAMED

"I knew a young fellow once who declared that propinquity was everything in the making of marriages, but I don't know that expediency is not a much more potent factor therein."

WHEN Dick, from his place on the other side of the hearthrug, said in that quiet way of his that there was just one thing he wanted to ask me, I felt an awful qualm go all over me.

"You wanted to ask me something," I said, all in a hurry.

"Yes," he said deliberately ; "in fact, there are one or two things I want to speak about before I see the Colonel. One is, that I should like to give you an engagement ring, if you have no objection."

"I should love to have one."

"Would you? Kit, did you really mean what you said just now—that you had expected me to give you an engagement ring?"

"Of course I did."

"But, my dear girl, it wasn't a real engagement; I've never even kissed you!"

"No, Dick, I know you haven't."

"Did you expect me to? Oh, my God, what a blind idiot I have been!"

"No—no, I didn't mean—"

"No, you meant nothing, except that you expected

me to play the part a little better than I have done. It was not because I didn't want to, not because I wasn't capable of it—oh, don't think that for a moment; there never was man so much in love with a girl as I am in love with you. I've kept it in, I've behaved like a stolid block of wood, when every time I came near you my pulses were beating—my whole soul was crying out for you."

"I—I didn't know—"

"Oh, Kit, Kit," he said, "where are your eyes? where are your ears?—I might say where is your heart?"

Well, I knew where my heart was, but it was not convenient just then to tell him. It had gone, I might say, a wool gathering up a little *cul-de-sac* on the road of love, and it had gone bang up against a hedge of prickly thorn before I realised that the road *was* a *cul-de-sac*. It is not a pleasant process, that close acquaintance with a hedge of prickly thorn, and my poor heart was somewhere between the past and the present, aching and bleeding, and very much ashamed of itself. I had always heard pride described as a sin, one of the minor sins, but a sin all the same. But where should I have been at this time without that balsam which pride poured into my wounds and bade them bleed no more? I—I should have been much worse off. But I couldn't go on thinking things out just then, for there was Faithful Dick sitting opposite, looking over towards me with an anxiety

written all over his face which made my heart jump and jump again. I got up, partly to relieve the tension of the situation, and partly because I could not look into those steadfast eyes any longer. He got up too.

"Look here," I said at last, "we—we haven't understood each other; you mustn't cook things up from me, it isn't my fault that I don't feel towards you as you feel towards me. Besides that, you've never really let me know."

"Let you know what?" he echoed.

"Well—everything—"

He had taken my hands, and was pressing them hard against his breast.

"Can't you understand," he said, "that I was afraid of boring you, that I did not want to surfeit you with a deluge of talk about my own personal wishes and desires? Can't you understand that when a man wants something very much, it behoves him to walk very warily, lest he take a false step and lose it altogether?"

"But did you want—do you want me so very much?" I asked.

He let my hands go free, and somehow the next moment I found myself close pressed against his breast.

"Do I want you so very much! What a question to put to a man!"

Then he fell to kissing me, and kissed me until I was almost out of breath.

"Can't you kiss me just once, Kit?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." And thereupon I kissed him.

He uttered an exclamation and drew back.

"Well, what is the matter?"

"Oh nothing.—if you don't understand, I can't explain. You've got to find your soul yet, little Kit."

I knew what he meant, and yet I made believe that I did not; but, for the life of me, I could not be any different to what I was. You see it was such a short time since I had thought that all the world—my world—was bounded by the personality of Georgey Vancourt. The very remembrance of him served to pull me up short, and to remind me that the days were quickly going by, and we should soon have him back with us in the regiment, Georgey—and his wife! I felt that, come what might between my father and Georgey, I must hang tight on to this faithful Dick of mine.

"Oh, don't be vexed," I said, "I shall come to it in time."

He pulled himself up short. "Yes, yes, don't let me frighten you. Don't think I am too exacting or anything of that kind. I wouldn't have you any different to what you are for the whole world—you clearly understand? As to this ring business, have you any choice? Will you leave it to me? Shall I have some sent up for you to see? Or will you come down town with me and help to choose it?"

"Do you know, I would rather like that. I know it isn't right. No, you ought to give me something

that would be a great surprise, and I ought to cry when you give it to me ; I know *that's* right, for I've read it in books."

He burst out laughing, and all the cloud in his eyes cleared as the laughter came.

" Well, we'll go contrary to written evidence," he declared, " and contrary to universal custom. I hate to have things sprung upon me myself. I remember when I came of age I had all sorts of things sprung upon me, beastly things that have been white elephants to me ever since. By Jove ! the only sensible present I got was a pair of guns. Then suppose you put your things on and we'll go down town and settle this business right away. I confess that I want to see your hand with a ring of mine on it."

I was nothing loth. I went off and tumbled on some outdoor garments—a fur coat, a big black hat and a pair of warm gloves, and in less than a couple of minutes we were walking briskly down the road in the direction of the town. I am bound to confess that Dick, having once made up his mind that the best move was to go ahead, went ahead with a sincerity which almost took my breath away. He bought me a particularly important-looking diamond ring, then deliberately suggested that, being adjacent, so to speak, we should be wise if we secured the wedding-ring right away.

" And I'd like to give you something else," he said.

"Oh, no, surely you've spent enough money on me for one day."

"No, I'd like to give you a sort of engagement present."

"A nice string of pearls," suggested the jeweller.

"Oh, have you got some good pearls?"

"I've a string here—they've never been shown, sir," he said, speaking in a mysterious tone, and fumbling in a drawer below the counter in an equally mysterious manner; "they are to be sold by private contract; lady—title—has reason for selling. They are singularly perfect in quality, shape and size, not too large for a lady to wear every day."

He drew out a blue velvet case and pressed the spring, disclosing to view a string of pinkish pearls. I could not help a cry of admiration escaping me; indeed, I should not have been a human girl if I had not felt a thrill of satisfaction when Dick fastened them round my neck and bade me keep them there. He wrote a cheque for them then and there—and a very big cheque it was.

I was already beginning to feel the charm of riches.

"You really like these," he said to me when the jeweller had gone to make out the bill.

"Oh, I love them, they are delightful. I like them better than anything else you could have given me. But I think it is rather extravagant, Dick."

"Extravagant? No. What's money for? If I can spend any money of mine to give you pleasure,

I shall consider that it has served its work in the world. And, by Jove! they suit you!"

"Oh, they would suit any girl," I said, putting up my hand to touch them.

Then we went quietly home, along the ill-lighted semi-country road, and Dick left me at the door, saying that he had just time to get back to barracks and dress for dinner. I didn't go down until I heard the dinner-bell go, for I did not want my father to see my new ring while I was alone with him. I had learned during these later days to be very wary, and not to run my head into the noose of an uncomfortable situation. It was well for me that I did so, for the moment I walked into the room where the two men were waiting, my father noticed my new possession.

"Hullo! you're very smart to-night!"

"Oh, no, Daddy, I've got a very old dress on."

"Oh, I didn't mean your dress," he said, with a laugh, and then he took up my hand. "A very nice handsome ring. I wondered why you didn't have one before."

"I've got something much nicer than this," I said, smiling across the hearthrug at Dick; "look what Dick has bought me—these pearls."

"By Jove! those are fine pearls. I suppose, then, you've settled the day?"

"I want to talk to you about that after dinner, Colonel," said Dick, very quietly.

And then the door opened, and Giffard came in to say that dinner was served. Nothing more was said just then about our future, but while we were eating our fish my father looked up and asked Dick if he had seen anything of Georgey Vancourt.

"He was to come back to-day, wasn't he?"

"Yes, they came back this afternoon."

"Oh, where are they putting up?"

"They've taken the best suite of rooms at Ellersley's."

"You don't say so! Oh, well, I daresay they'll be very comfortable there."

"Oh, they'll be comfortable enough."

"I suppose," said my father, "you didn't happen to see Vancourt?"

"Yes, I did. He came up to barracks, and I saw him as I went in—just after I left you, Kit."

"Oh, really," I remarked. "How does he look?"

"Very unlike a gay and gallant bridegroom," said Dick.

He did not speak in an ill-natured way, but as if he were merely stating a fact.

"In fact, the fellows were saying," he continued, "they had never seen Georgey like that before. He seemed so dull and heavy—so unlike himself."

"Ah—I wonder what the young lady is like," said my father.

"I did hear," Dick replied, "that she got him at the point of the sword. It was a case of the father

coming to you if things weren't settled straight off."

" You don't say so ! Oh, well, then, it's just as well young Master Georgey saw the advisability of settling his little affairs by himself. As to his wife, he's got her, and he must make the best of her. You will have to call, Kit."

" Oh, yes, I'll call—with you."

" Oh, need I come ? "

" Oh, yes, Daddy, you must ; I absolutely decline to go without you."

" I should have thought that you and Dick here could have gone and represented me."

" No, Daddy ; when I'm married to Dick I'll go and call on the people necessary to be called on, and I'll go with Dick, or perhaps I will even go without him. But I'll not go and call on Mrs Vancourt without you."

" Very well. But perhaps, Dick," my father added, " now that you've had a specimen of what this young woman is capable of in the shape of insubordination, self-will, and all the rest of it, you'll not be so very keen on keeping to your bargain."

And for answer Dick laughed, and my father laughed—and, for the matter of that, I laughed also. And yet I could not see, for the life of me, any trace of humour in the conversation.

" I think," said Dick, deliberately, " that we'll keep to our bargain."

CHAPTER X

MET AT LAST

"It often happens that, when we have looked forward to an event with the deepest dread, it passes off quite easily."

THEY settled everything that night. I had very little to do with it, for Dick came into the drawing-room after what seemed an interminable talk with my father, and said, "Well, Kit, subject to your approval, your father and I have practically settled everything to-night."

"Yes."

I felt that my heart was beating to suffocation, and my voice sounded a long way off, and as if it belonged to somebody else.

"Do you think you can get your things ready in a month? You needn't buy a whole draper's shop, you know."

It flashed into my mind that the intelligence of men on some points is extremely limited, for they always seem to think that everything a woman puts on her head is a bonnet, and that everything she wears on her back comes out of a draper's shop. But I did not go into that question then.

"Yes, but I don't want to get my things in Northtowers."

"No, but we are all due for our leave next week, immediately after the ball, that is, and we thought if you were in London for a month you could get everything that is necessary. Because, you know, I shall not keep you without money after we are married—you will be able to buy some rags to make a show with later on."

"My dear Dick," I said, "I don't think I shall care much about making a show. I never did consider the opinion of other people, and I don't think I shall begin now."

"Then we may take it that to about a month from now is what we have to work to?"

"You mean—?"

"Yes, to be married."

"If you like."

I felt that my tone was grudging, that I ought to be shaken or slapped, but I felt that way, and I could not help it. I was, to tell the truth, a little indignant that they should have arranged every detail without consulting me in any way. Yes, it was a little unreasonable, because I really had arranged the main lines myself with Dick.

"You have fixed the day," I said, looking up at him.

In spite of his evident anxiety not to upset me, he burst out laughing.

"No, no, of course we haven't. Is it likely? I said in about a month's time. We agreed to that this afternoon, you and I."

"Did we?"

"You know we did."

I put my hand up to my throat from a silly feeling that I was going to begin crying. My fingers came in contact with my pearls.

"I beg your pardon, Dick, I didn't mean to be stupid; I can't help it, I was born stupid, you'll find it out one day. You are doing a very bad thing for yourself in marrying me—you'll find it out later on."

"Perhaps I shall," he admitted, "and if I do I shall not forget that you have forewarned me. But until that day, if you please, we will leave personal abuse of yourself out of the question. I—it doesn't amuse me to hear anyone abuse you—not even yourself."

"No, no, I know I'm very stupid. It is only that I hate being rushed into anything, and I have been rushed into this in a way. I believe I should have been quite in love with you if I could have taken my own time over it."

"Well, that's a pity, because, as circumstances went, you couldn't take your own time over it, you had to accommodate yourself to being made the ball of Fate—and so had I, for that matter."

I confess I had never looked at it in that light before.

"Look here, Dick," I said, "if you want to draw back it's not too late."

"I don't want to draw back, and you know it—nobody better," he said quietly. "It's a great pity you did not stop in the dining-room to join in the discussion; it was all about you, and nobody had a better right than you to be there. You knew I was going to speak to your father, and you deliberately left me, giving me, as I thought, the opportunity of doing so. Perhaps you will talk to him yourself, and then you can make any fresh arrangement you like. We thought this that we have come to was the only sensible and reasonable course to take."

I was still standing with the fingers of one hand curled about my string of pearls. I can't tell you what I felt like, but I think most of anything like a naughty child that has cried for the moon, and is by way of refusing every other pleasure because the moon is not attainable. I knew it was no use quarrelling with Dick, I should have to marry him sooner or later, then why not sooner? Besides, Georgey Vancourt had come back to Northtowers with his bride, and they were going to live in style in the smartest suite of apartments of which the old city boasted, and I did not want to meet Georgey Vancourt, to say nothing of Mrs Georgey Vancourt, in the guise of a forlorn young woman who had been abandoned by two lovers. Oh, no, no! The horror of this situation came over me with such force that I threw my pride, and all the other con-

flicting emotions which had possession of me, to the winds, and impulsively stretched out my hand to Dick.

"I don't want to talk to my father," I said. "I'm a little beast; I wonder you stand any nonsense from me at all, I wonder you don't just take me by the throat and knock my head against the wall. It would do me good."

Dick burst out laughing. "It would be rather a drastic way of bringing one's young woman to hear reason, wouldn't it?" he said, the anxious look vanishing from his face instantly.

"Yes, but I should deserve it. You've been so awfully good to me to-day in every way—too good. Think of your spending all that money on me, and putting all my whims and wishes before your own. Oh, I'm a little beast; you'll find it out one of these days."

So our nearest approach to a quarrel was patched up, and I went to bed that night secure in the knowledge that I had a good, stout sheet of armour to put between me and Georgey Vancourt on the following day, when I supposed I should have to pay my state visit to his bride.

It was as I expected. The next morning at breakfast my father looked up from his newspaper and said, "Oh, by the bye, Kit, if we've got to call upon the Vancourts we had better do it at once."

"Oh, certainly," I returned.

"Yes, if we go to-day it will be over and done with, and, of course, it's only right that you should call as soon as possible. Only it's an unmitigated bore—I'd get out of it if I could. Then I'll drive you down. Shall I order the carriage for three o'clock?"

"Yes, if you like, dear."

So at three o'clock I came down into the hall to find the smart phaeton, with its pair of bright bays, standing at the door. Two minutes later my father and I were going at a brisk pace in the direction of the town. It took but a few minutes to reach the house in which the Vancourts were living. The respectable ex-butler, who answered the door, informed us that Mrs Vancourt was at home, thereupon I went into the house, followed by my father. I had been in the rooms before ; they were held very much in repute both by army people and hunting men staying in the town ; indeed, we had looked at them ourselves before going to the Moor House.

There was nothing in the appearance of the rooms to indicate the character of their present owners, but then, as I quickly told myself, the bride had not yet had time to put any impress of herself upon her surroundings, and the only personal touch that a noticed consisted of a large gold cigarette case, with a big G.V. in diamonds ornamenting one corner. She kept us waiting some little time, so long, in-

deed, that my father fumed and fidgeted, and went to the windows, ostensibly to see if the horses were all right. And when she did come, she received us as if we were the most ordinary visitors, half patronised me, and evidently had no idea of the relative positions of my father and her husband. She was a long, good-looking girl, with a big mouth—a mouth which parted in a wide smile, showing some strong, white, animal-like teeth.

"How do you do?" she said as she came in. "It's most kind of you to call so soon. Good morning, Miss Owen, I hope you and I are going to be great friends. It's awfully strange coming right away where one doesn't know a soul excepting one's husband—and George is not very communicative about people."

I felt very thankful for that.

"I don't think," said my father, speaking for me, "that you will have much chance of becoming friendly with my daughter as yet."

I don't know whether she noticed that he spoke of me as "my daughter." That, with my father, meant the very quintessence of stiffness and stand-offishness.

"We are going on leave directly after the ball."

"Oh, directly after the ball! I'm so glad you're not going before the ball."

Evidently she knew little or nothing of the ways of

soldier men, or she would have realised that the first person to be consulted about the date of a ball, and the most necessary person to be present at it, was the commanding officer of the regiment which was giving it.

"Are you going to town, or to Paris, or to your own place perhaps?"

"We are going to town," said my father, "and my daughter will be much occupied there in—in—seeing dressmakers and—er—persons of that kind."

"Why! are you going to be married?" said she, turning a pair of dark startled eyes upon me.
"George didn't tell me anything about it."

I had sufficient presence of mind to summon up a very natural sounding laugh.

"I don't think Mr Vancourt knew anything about it when he went away to be married himself."

"Oh, didn't he? And who are you going to marry?"

But before I could answer this question Georgey himself came into the room. He evidently did not know that we were there; possibly he had come in by the side door, or had not noticed the carriage moving slowly up and down.

"Oh—er—oh—how good of you to come so soon, sir," he said, looking from one to the other, "and Kit, too—this is very friendly and kind of you."

I saw his wife looked rather astonished at his way of addressing me.

"George," she broke in, "you never told me that Miss Owen was going to be married also."

"I don't think I knew it myself, Emmeline, until this morning. In fact I only learned it on the way down from barracks. I—I have to congratulate you," he said, turning to me, "and I must congratulate Markham when I see him."

"Oh, Captain Markham—that was the man we met yesterday in the High Street—in that shop."

"No, no," said Georgey, "that was not Markham. We met two of the fellows," turning to me, "but Markham was not one of them. But I say, Colonel, won't you—mayn't we offer you anything; is it too early for tea?"

"Much too early for tea, thank you, Mr Vancourt; besides, we are going out to tea—I think we are going out to several teas. Northtowers is fearfully busy just now; I suppose it is the ball coming on. Everyhody's waking up in a way. As for our coming so soon, I think my father and I must almost apologise for that, but we are so very much pressed just now, and we are going away in a few days, you know."

So we made conversation for a little while, then I looked at Daddy and we simultaneously made a move. I bade the bride good-bye, telling her that I should be at home on the afternoon following the day of the ball.

"I shall be very pleased if you will come to tea

that day," I said, as I took her hand. "It's the only afternoon I shall be at home. You will meet a good many people, and we shall be very pleased to see you."

"Thank you very much, I will come," she replied. "Good-bye."

Then, as my father bade her a very stiff and elaborate adieu, Georgey turned to go out of the room with me.

"I will see the Colonel and Miss Owen into their carriage," he said.

CHAPTER XI

THE GIRL AT THIS END

"The most terrible bogey is often something which three words of explanation and common sense would lay for ever."

I SAW Georgey Vancourt and his wife several times between the day of our call and that of the ball given by the regiment to the neighbourhood of North-towers, but I never saw them at really close quarters. I imagine that Smiley *père* had given his daughter a substantial dot, for Georgey, who, as all the regiment knew, did not possess tuppence with which to bless himself, had started a very high dog-cart, with a very showy mare between the shafts, and I once or twice saw the fair Emmeline, between the hours of breakfast and lunch, driving herself in an exceedingly well turned out cart, with a blue roan pony which would have passed muster at Tattersall's itself. It is true she gave one the idea of a person who had not always driven things, and when she was set up beside Georgey in the high dog-cart, she had a nervous look which detracted very much from the beauty of the turn-out.

I did not, however, speak to Georgey until the night of the ball, and then, as soon as I entered the

ballroom (and I was very early, for naturally I helped to receive the guests with my father), he came up to me, and in a knock-down sort of tone demanded *largesse* in the way of dances.

"Of course you'll give an old pal a few dances."

"I'll give you one," I said.

"Only one?"

"Well—your step suits mine, it is true, so I'll give you two—no more. And I tell you frankly, if Captain Markham wants them, I shall take them away from you."

He frowned blackly, and muttered something under his breath which looked ugly. I did not let my programme go, but picked out a couple of dances at long distances from each other, telling him he could have those or none. It was after this that my faithful Dick came up to me with a laugh.

"It seems to me, if I don't come and make sure of my dances, I sha'n't get any," he remarked, holding out his hand for my card. "I saw young Georgey, the gay and gallant Benedick, making hay while the sun shone. Now, about your waltzes. Your step suits mine—nobody in the regiment so well. How many may I have?"

"You are to take as many as you want, Dick."

He had brought me a present that night—a brooch formed of the letters of his own name, Dick—and I was wearing it right across my bodice on the left shoulder, just where it showed most. I suppose

there was hardly a woman in the room who was not wearing flowers. I hate flowers in a ballroom. The sight of a *corsage* bouquet always seems to me like Nero fiddling while Rome was burning. I should hate to dance to slow murder !

I was wearing Dick's pearls round my throat, and I was feeling that whether I was in love with him or whether I was not, whether, if I had my free choice, I should take Georgey Vancourt in preference to him, or whether I should not marry at all unless I were obliged, yet he was my faithful friend before he was my adoring lover.

"Well, nobody will expect you to dance with anybody but me, so I shall take the lot." Then he opened my programme. "H'm—G.V.—G.V.—"

"Oh, you can have them if you want them—I only gave them to him on that condition."

"Of course I want them, but it would be churlish and foolish to want to keep you entirely to myself. I'll let him have those two."

Nothing happened out of the ordinary until I found myself dancing with Georgey Vancourt. I had danced, eaten ices, had drunk cup, had passed the time of day with various people I knew, and had had a solidly good time. Then came waltz number seven, and Georgey appeared to claim me. I left Dick at last, and began my waltz with my old love. They were playing Frou-Frou. You know perhaps how Frou-Frou goes, and I must confess that, per-

factly as Dick's step suited mine, yet there was about Georgey's dancing something beyond. As a rule, soldiers' dancing is not worth talking about, and these two were quite the show men of the regiment as far as dancing was concerned.

"At last!" he breathed into my ear, and the hand held against the back of my waist pressed me a little more closely.

"You are holding me too tightly, Georgey," I said in the most prosaic tones I could command.

"Can I ever hold you too tightly?" he asked reproachfully.

"Certainly you can. It is not necessary to make an exhibition of me—the whole room is watching us."

"Nonsense! Nobody is watching us, unless it be Markham. He knows perfectly that he would never have had the chance of getting you if I hadn't been cornered elsewhere."

"Stop, please," I said, "I dislike talking whilst I am dancing."

So we swung steadily and smoothly on. I was wearing a dress that took no trouble or attention. I hated Georgey! Yes, I hated him, and despised myself at the same time. Why? Because I knew that I didn't really hate him, because I knew that I only hated him in a make-believe kind of way because he had played me false.

"I must talk," he said presently, as if he had

divined my thoughts, "I must talk, I have so much to explain, so much to tell you, so much to ask you—"

"To ask me?"

"—to forgive," he ended. "Tell me, dear little girl, darling of my heart—you that I have loved since the day that I first set eyes upon you, tell me, was my letter in time?"

"Oh, I have answered all that, told you everything. Don't ask me any more, it's past and gone, over and done with, it doesn't matter whether it was in time or not. Besides, I never meant to go."

"Oh, that won't wash, little girl, that won't wash. You are going to marry Markham. Tell me—you wouldn't have married Markham if I—"

He hesitated for a word.

"Had stuck to me," I suggested.

"Kit," he said, "that was a real nasty one."

"Was it? Well, if it was, don't you deserve it?"

"No, Kit, I don't think I do."

It came into my mind that there was never a man who thought he deserved the ill-luck of not getting what he wanted, and Georgey Vancourt was certainly a very human young man.

"Besides," I went on, "I—I don't want to discuss Captain Markham with you, or, for the matter of that, anybody else. He's my future husband, he's your senior officer, and in both capacities he is to be respected, if you have no objection. Why," I continued, standing still in the dimly-lighted corridor,

where, for the moment, we found ourselves alone, "why, for a pygmy like you to compare yourself with a man like Captain Markham is absurd—preposterous. And besides, Georgey," I continued rapidly, leaving him no time to do more than open his mouth in an astonished gasp, "you are a married man, you have a wife, little more than a bride, and for you to be making back-handed love to me is simply disgusting. I am ashamed to think that I even had a little flirtation with you—I am ashamed of you, Georgey, do you understand me, ashamed of you. More than that, I am ashamed to think that I ever condescended to have you for a friend, to call you by your Christian name, and to allow you to call me by mine. It's what all men of the regiment have not done, or ever dared to do, and from this moment we will be, if you please, Mr Vancourt and Miss Owen to each other until I take my husband's name."

"Oh—if you are going to be disagreeable—" he began in lofty tones.

"I am certainly not going to be agreeable," I returned; "there is nothing in you to call such a quality forth in me. You have your wife, stick to her. You will never find anybody else that sticking to will stand you in such good stead. I, certainly, shall never be the smallest use to you; at least—I—I hope not."

He did not notice my last gibe, but repeated the earlier part of my sentence.

"Yes," he said, "I have my wife—my wife—and oh, Kit,—God forgive me! — I am so miserable."

I turned and looked at him critically. "Yes," I said, "you look it, and what a satisfaction it must be to you, when you feel how miserable you are, to know that you deserve it. I always think," I said, trying to speak in a hard and flippant tone, "that one of the hardest things in life is when one suffers without deserving it."

Then I rose from the rout seat on which we had been sitting and shook out my flounces.

"Come, I must go back again, I am engaged for the next dance."

"I'm not going back," he said coolly.

"Oh, aren't you? Well, I am, and it will look rather bad if I go back by myself, won't it? And you a married man! Won't your Emmeline think it rather queer. I saw she had her eye on us as we went out of the ballroom."

"Damn Emmeline!" he muttered.

"God help Emmeline," I said quietly. "Poor girl! I never pitied anyone so much in my life."

He caught hold of my wrist with a rough, brutal grasp. "And you once meant to be my Emmeline yourself."

"Oh, no, Mr Vancourt, no, you must not let your vanity carry you quite so far. The temptation must be great, looking back and remembering everything,

but you can take it from me that I never had the smallest intention of being Mrs Georgey Vancourt. Why," I said, laughing, "if you had heard what the others said about you when you were first thinking of getting married, you wouldn't think that the lady had landed a prize, you wouldn't have thought that any woman in her senses would throw herself away on such a bargain."

I felt that I was saying too much, and only a fool ever does that. I wanted to get back to the safe shelter of Dick's vicinity.

"*Will* you take me back?" I said impatiently.

"I really don't care," he replied.

"Oh—you *are* rude! I'll go back by myself."

However, he came with me, still protesting in no measured terms that I was treating him abominably. Fortunately he had to cool down when we got back to the world again and to behave in an ordinary everyday manner. I found Dick waiting at the entrance of the ballroom.

"Ah, there you are! Do you know our dance has just begun? I was wondering which way to start out to look for you."

I dismissed my cavalier with a cool little nod and a gay word of farewell. I felt that I was acting beautifully! And what a long breath of relief I took when Dick and I were once more swinging over the smooth polished floor.

"Well," he said, when we had taken several turns,

"well, did the valiant Georgey bore you to death with transports over the fair Emmeline?"

"He did talk about her," I said quietly, "but I confess that neither Emmeline, nor Georgey's way of talking about her, proved at all interesting to me."

"So little," he laughed, "that it is quite a relief to get back to prosaic life again. Ah well," he gave a short sharp sigh, "ah well, those young lovers who have chucked all the world for love—I suppose they have their reward."

When Dick made that remark about young lovers the idea fairly jumped into my mind that we had no proof that either Georgey Vancourt or his wife had "chucked the world for love." It had been impressed on us through the telephone that the fair Emmeline had what my father called dibs—and plenty of them—and Dick himself had told me that Emmeline had held Georgey at the point of the sword. Nor had I forgotten what I had heard talked over by the two men of Ours in the sale yard at Idleminster. I opened my mouth to say something of this, then shut it again. I was learning wisdom, for I didn't want Dick to know that I was the girl at this end of the journey whom Georgey had "chucked" either for the sake of Emmeline Smiley's guineas or because of Emmeline Smiley's men-folk.

CHAPTER XII

MY LITTLE TEA-PARTY.

"Nothing is so strictly local as etiquette. That is why most nations think other nations rude. The etiquette that suits London extremely well is quite out of drawing in a provincial centre."

IF Georgey Vancourt was wretched in his new life, I had ample evidence on the day following the ball that his wife was not altogether happy in hers. It happened that Georgey himself was orderly officer for the day, and therefore could not get out of barracks to attend my little tea-party. But the fair Emmeline, as the entire regiment called her, arrived in good time, and was in great spirits.

"I suppose," she said, as I went forward to receive her, "that I ought to be at home crying my eyes out because George's on duty to-day, but as I told him this morning, I mean to have a very good time, and make the most of my chance. I must say, Miss Owen, he was very sick because he couldn't come to-day. I've never seen George so sick about anything."

She turned from me before I could speak, and greeted two very young subalterns of the line regiment then quartered at Northtowers with a loud, hail-fellow-well-met air and tone which would certainly have made the absent Georgey shudder.

"Take me down to tea," she said, speaking in such a way that either could have taken it to himself.

"Certainly," they said in a breath, and they both went.

She was so long, so languishing of eye, and her smile was so perpetual, somehow she seemed out of place in our house, or in any such house as ours. Indeed she was the type of girl that you find selling flowers at the street corner.

Some ten minutes after this Dick came in with a lady of some importance to whom he had been giving refreshment in the dining-room, and presently he edged round to where I was standing.

"Come and have some tea, Kit," he said.

"I should like to. Do you think I could leave now?"

"Oh, yes. There's a sight in the dining-room that will make your hair stand on end."

"Oh! What sort of sight?"

"Well, the fair Emmeline is, as she elaborately explains it to all and sundry, making the most of her chance. She is enjoying herself to the top of her bent, and her bent takes the form of several little grabby officers. She's booking dances for to-night; at least she was when I came out of the room."

I found when we reached the dining-room that the fair Emmeline was indeed "going it" for all she was worth. She was settled in one side of the wide, great window-seat that surrounded the huge

embrasured window which extended along the entire side of the dining-room. The two youngsters were sitting as near her as they could possibly get, one indeed with his back to the room so as to shut her quite into a corner. I saw by the faces of the servants waiting behind the table that Dick had not exaggerated the situation ; and as I approached the table saying that I would have a cup of tea, one of our married ladies whispered to me that it was a thousand pities that Georgey wasn't there to stop his wife making a complete fool of herself.

" My dear, the way that woman is carrying on ! Years older than Georgey ! Where can she have come from ? "

" She came from London," I said. " I think her father is something in the City."

" Money, of course," said Mrs Marchmont. " And they say that Georgey was in the thick of a very heavy affair at this end when he was called up to marry this creature. I don't think I shall call upon her."

" Oh, you must !" I exclaimed.

" Well, yes, I suppose I must," she said in disgusted accents. " But my intercourse with the young lady will be very limited, I assure you. Well, my dear, I am going into the drawing-room ; I don't care to degrade myself by watching that creature any longer."

She sailed away, a mass of silk and frou-frou and beautiful sables. I looked at Dick, who burst out laughing.

"I should like to know one thing," said he in an undertone as he handed a plate of cakes to me, "who is the girl at this end of the journey. I never took much stock of Georgey himself, so I never noticed anything out of the ordinary in his intercourse with other people, but I really should like to know who is the girl. Does she know exactly how and why he left her? Does she know the circumstances of his marriage? If not, has she seen the fair Emmeline yet? And having seen her, what does she think of her, and what does she now think of Georgey?"

For a moment I really could not speak.

"If she's got a ha'porth of sense, Dick," I said, when I could find my voice, "she knows now, if she did not know it before, that she's very well rid of Georgey Vancourt."

"My dear child," he returned quickly, "love never goes after any ordinary process of common sense—you love, or you don't love. I, being very much in love with you, have to thank my lucky stars that I fell in love with a girl who is a lady to the very tips of her fingers, and not—that sort of person." Again by a look he indicated that he was thinking of the fair Emmeline.

I hastily swallowed my tea and went back to the drawing-room, and for the next hour I was much too busy receiving all sorts and conditions of people to give the fair Emmeline a thought. Then my father came fussing in. Now, when my father fussed—you

know what I mean by that word—it meant that something had happened to seriously put him out.

"I say, Kit," he said in his most abrupt tones, "can't you do anything to stop that exhibition in there?"

"In where?" I asked sweetly.

"In the drawing-room, of course."

"Why—what are you talking about, Daddy?"

"I'm talking about the long young woman that Georgey Vancourt married. She's making a most hideous exhibition of herself; everybody's talking about her. Go and stop it."

"Oh, my dear, I really can't stop it. I think the young lady was fairly lively when I had a cup of tea more than an hour ago."

"Lively! You go and stop it, Kit; you are the mistress of this house—it's your party—you can stop it perfectly well if you choose."

Thus peremptorily bidden, I had no choice but to go to the dining-room and see for myself what was going on. I found that the trio in the window had been joined by a couple of other young men—soldiers both of them, but not officers of Ours. I do not know what they were doing, but it sounded like a game at a school treat. I went towards the group and put my hand on the back of the chair that was nearest to me.

"Won't you come into the drawing-room, Mrs Vancourt?" I suggested.

She looked up, her eyes full of laughter, and her

lips parted in a great smile that spread from ear to ear, her teeth gleaming, and the tip of her red tongue showing between them.

"Well, I'm enjoying myself very much here, thank you."

"But don't you think you'd like to come into the drawing-room? There are so many people there—I could introduce you—they would like to know you."

She looked up, the laughter still lingering on eyes and lips. "Awfully good of you to try to make me do my social duty," she said in an insolent tone, "but I've been here an unconscionable time. I ought to apologise, only I always stay where I am enjoying myself; I always made that a rule in London. No, I won't come into the drawing-room, thanks; I'll bid you good-bye."

She did bid me good-bye, and the four young men made their farewells at the same time. One put her sables round her shoulders, another gave her her muff of the same fur, a third remarked that he had her purse quite safely, and a fourth made no excuse at all. So they all went away together, and I went as far as the hall door and watched them go down the road, their shrill laughter echoing on the winter air. My father, still looking distinctly annoyed, met me at the drawing-room door.

"Isn't she coming?" he asked in his snappiest tones.

"No, Daddy, dear, she's gone home, taking her four little men with her."

"H'm!" said he, in disgusted accents, "I should say that young woman's career would be a brief and inglorious one. It don't do to marry for dibs."

Well, I suppose it does not do to marry for dibs, but, although I did not put the question to him at that moment, I should have liked to have known what my father's idea of my marriage was.

Certainly if Mrs Georgey Vancourt had wished to make herself conspicuous that afternoon, she had succeeded in her object, for practically everybody in the room was talking about her, discussing her extraordinary behaviour, her probable origin, and her probable end.

"She hasn't got a single dance left for the ball to-night," said one disgusted matron, "and she hasn't given one to her husband. I'm sorry for that nice boy!"

She looked out over the world, as it were, as if it were a flat. Her words were, however, taken up from every possible standpoint.

"I never called Georgey Vancourt a nice boy. I think he's a stupid, vapid, conceited young man," said one.

"Oh, most vapid, most horribly conceited! By the way, Miss Owen, he was a great friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Not more so than the other men of the regiment," I replied.

It wasn't true, and I felt my cheeks flush as the denial passed my lips.

"I hear that he dined at mess last night," quoth Mrs Marchmont. "Philip tells me that he stayed ever so late, and that he was in a deplorable condition when he came home."

My father thrust his hands deep down into his pockets, and spoke as only a commanding officer or a bishop is ever able to speak.

"I wasn't dining at mess myself last night," he said; "but what about Marchmont? Why didn't he go home in good time and set the youngster an example?"

"Oh, come, Colonel, that won't do!" the gay little woman cried. "If every one of your lambs were as much of a lamb as Philip is, you'd be a very lucky commanding officer, and you'd have very little trouble with your regiment."

"Then they could be called 'Owen's Lambs,' eh?" said my father.

"They could be called that now," said Mrs Marchmont, demurely, "for there are black lambs as well as white ones in every fold."

And then they all left, and the conversation was turned from Georgey and the fair Emmeline. That evening we all met at the hospital ball, which, as a matter of course, followed the ball given by the officers of the White Horse, and we all enjoyed the edifying spectacle of Mrs Georgey Vancourt thoroughly enjoying herself. It was just after midnight

when Georgey, released from his day's duty, joined us, or, I should say, came to join his wife. Never shall I forget the look of ludicrous consternation on his handsome young face. He turned on his heel and came across the room to me.

"Have you kept me a dance?" he asked.

"Kept you a dance, Mr Vancourt? Oh, no; my dances were all gone quite a long while ago."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you perhaps might have had enough friendly feeling to do so. As you haven't—don't think about it."

"There are plenty of ladies who have no partners. I see several girls sitting-out looking the picture of disconsolate misery."

"I don't want to dance, I don't feel like it."

"But you would have danced with me?"

"Yes, I would have danced with you, that is true. I believe there was a gentleman named Nero who fiddled while Rome was burning. I don't feel inclined to dance to-night when my heart is breaking—unless I can find somebody worth dancing with. There's only one woman in this room worth dancing with—she hasn't kept anything for me."

"Surely you are going to dance with your wife?"

"With that—" he began contemptuously, with a look under his eyelashes at the fair Emmeline "No, Kit," he said, "I don't think my wife will have kept any dances on the chance of my being here in time to claim them."

CHAPTER XIII

ST GEORGE'S, HANOVER SQUARE

"There are many situations in which marriage is the best safeguard of all."

THE following day we went to London—my father, Dick and I—and, much to my relief, I left the tragedy of Georgey Vancourt behind me. I had not much time to think about him during the weeks which followed. I had all my work cut out to get my wedding things ready by the date fixed for our marriage. I did not want to think about Georgey Vancourt, for when I did it was only to feel the hot blood go mounting up to my face, and a huge sensation of shame which went like a hot wave all over me.

I had, indeed, so much to do that Dick, very considerately, engaged me a secretary for the time, so that I might have somebody to help me send out the invitations to the wedding, write notes of thanks for presents received, and to do the correspondence which concerned my trousseau. By great good luck he lighted on a young lady whose handwriting resembled my own so closely that I myself hardly knew them apart. This saved me an enormous

amount of grind, and also gave me more time for going about with Dick, and I must confess that I enjoyed my month in town very much. I had not very often spent that season in town, for my father, being a great hunting man, always wanted to be at Owen's Rest for his long leave. We did not spend all our time going to parties, although I knew plenty of people in town. But Dick and I went to all sorts of queer and out-of-the-way places in quest of quaint things with which to embellish our house when we should get one. I don't mean, of course, any of Dick's houses, of which he had several, but the furnished houses in which we should abide from time to time until Dick chose to leave the service. I had expressed to him the idea that I should not care to move a single thing away from any of the Markham houses, but that I would have odds and ends for travelling about bought specially for that purpose. So we went into all sorts of queer places, and I learned to know the King's Road, Fulham Road and the Brompton Road as well as I knew Bond Street itself. And as well as these thoroughfares we went into all sorts of side streets, and in that way I picked up a great many treasures which would be easily packed, and which would look charming when disposed about my rooms. Oh ! I had a gay time, I assure you.

And then the day came when I looked in the glass for the last time as Kit Owen, and I went to that

extremely ugly church in Hanover-Square, and Dick and I went through the ceremony which made us one. There was a tremendous crowd, for our friends seemed to think it a marriage of extreme importance. Most of the officers of the White Horse came up for the occasion, and all the relations on both sides came to a man and woman.

No—I don't think it matters what I wore. It was a white gown of clinging silken material, and I was enveloped in a voluminous veil, which somebody considerately put back before I left the vestry. It was then that I felt the first shade of nervousness as I confronted the sea of faces which seemed to fill the church, and to avoid looking at them as we started on our progress down the aisle I turned my gaze towards the gallery at the end of the church. The galleries were, I knew, given over to strangers, and, to my astonishment, at the very back, as far back, indeed, as anyone could stand, I saw the white face of Georgey Vancourt.

They had accepted the invitation to the wedding, and their joint present consisted of a pair of heavy silver candlesticks, which had nothing but their actual cost to recommend them. Why Georgey should have come masquerading at the back of the gallery was beyond my ken altogether, but the sight of his tragic, death-like countenance caused me to give a start, which drew my bridegroom's attention directly to me.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I—I trod on something," I answered.

It was quite true, and yet, what an expert liar I was becoming.

"Are you sure you are not hurt?" he said anxiously.

I shook my head. And so we continued our way down the aisle, and we had not gone a couple of yards before I perceived Mrs Georgey, standing with a counterpart of herself at the end of one of the pews nearest to the centre aisle.

"Good luck!" she said in a loud whisper as we went by, and she nodded and smiled, and showed her white teeth as if she herself had found matrimony everything that was desirable.

I saw her afterwards for a minute when she came to renew her felicitations at the hotel where my father gave the wedding breakfast.

"I daresay you have had a good time all your life, Mrs Markham," she said in my ear, "but you will enjoy yourself fifty times more now you are married. My goodness! I wouldn't be unmarried again for all the world."

"Is Mr Vancourt here?" I asked.

"No; he came to town, but—he couldn't face it."

"Couldn't face it!" I repeated.

She giggled mischievously. "Oh, you know," she said.

"Indeed, I don't know ; I don't understand you in the least."

I saw out of the tail of my eye that Dick was safely talking to an important-looking old lady who was quite a stranger to me. Mrs Georgey continued,—

"Do you think I don't know everything ?" she asked. "He only married me because he couldn't get you. But he needn't flatter himself that it will break my heart. I'm going to have a good time from now till the end of my life."

"Why did you marry him then ?"

"Because I wanted to get away from home. It's no joke living with a martinet father who thinks because you haven't got a mother you must be in mischief fifty-nine minutes out of every hour. But I'll tell you about that later on. Take my tip, my dear, begin as you mean to go on. Don't be too kind. I dropped down to things quite early, and awfully glad I am that you are married, because it makes things so much easier for me, and so much less tempting for poor old Georgey."

So she had begun to call him "Georgey" at last ! She nodded and smiled again, that fixed smile that was so aggravating, and then she slipped away in the crowd. Nor did I see her again till I beheld her surrounded by several young men trying to blind us with rice before we took our final departure. Dick's remark as the carriage drove away was short and to the point.

"That's an awful young woman!" he said.

Well, I didn't think much about either of them after this. We went to Paris and then down South, and for two months, beyond a few scrappy letters from my father, I heard no news from the regiment. At the end of two months, when our leave was up, we went back to Northtowers. Dick had taken a large house on the outskirts of the town, one that had never been let before. It was an absurdly large house for two people, but, as Dick put it, it was just as well for us to make ourselves comfortable since we had the chance of doing so. And the following day the rush of callers began. Right in the van came Mrs Georgey.

"I'm sure you've had a perfectly lovely time," she said as she came into the room, "I can see it in your eye."

"I have had a lovely time," I admitted frankly.

"You must excuse my coming alone, Mrs Markham," she said. "I feel it isn't the right thing at all. But you know what Georgey is."

"No, I don't know what Mr Vancourt is," I said quietly.

"Oh—oh—you don't? Well, he's difficult, that's to put the matter in a nutshell. Not that it makes any difference to me, I married him with my eyes open, and I've had them open ever since. I've got my cousin staying with me now, and I hope, when I come again, you won't mind my bringing her, but I wanted to see you alone to-day."

I didn't see myself why Mrs Vancourt should have made a point of seeing me alone, but I couldn't very well tell her so. She was looking extremely well and brilliantly happy, and in her plain dress of blue cloth, with lovely sables, she was a personable bride enough. A little *dégagée* about the head, but even in that I felt myself a little hyper-critical.

"I like this place," she went on. "I'm so glad that they are going to leave us here. I was afraid that they might be moving us on in the spring shuffle. I get such a lot of time to myself. You see, Georgey hunts three days a week, and is on duty three times a fortnight, so between the two I get a very good time. And I'm awfully well here," she continued, sticking out a very long pointed foot from under the hem of her gown. "I never was very well in town, although I was born there and lived there all my life. It makes such a difference what you eat and drink, whether you are free and happy or not. And my father—well, to put it frankly, my father was a bit of a beast. He meant well, poor dear, but he had ridiculous old-fashioned notions. I think it was because my mother died so many years ago, and he was rather awkwardly placed. You see, my old nurse brought us up from the beginning, and she never would stand having any lady chaperon or anything of that kind in the house. He felt he owed her a debt, you know, and that sort of thing, and so

he was extra hard on me for everything I did—such a sermon whenever I went to a dance ! Now, half the girls I know in London that go to these big dances—the Empress Rooms, the Grafton Galleries—the Supper Club—they have a shadowy sort of chaperon, somebody just to swear by. Father always insisted that I should have a chaperon who didn't dance. You may imagine the time I had ! Well, I did have a time, you know ; I used to make her presents—yes, I always had plenty of money, and I used to fetch her and pay for her ticket and all that, for, of course, she was a poor lady or she wouldn't have been bothered with me. As it was, I don't think it could have been worth her while, sitting night after night glued to a bench watching me capering round ; it wouldn't have amused me, I know. But it was a horrid anxious life, in spite of my seeming to have such a good time."

"Anxious ? How ?"

"Well, you never knew when you wouldn't have a tremendous row about something, and my brothers—yes, I have several brothers—have a great love for the proprieties, not for themselves, you understand, but for their sister. She must be like Cæsar's wife, above suspicion. I was always treading on eggs as far as they were concerned. Oh, they did give me a bad time among them, an awfully bad time. And then my chaperon went and died and I got a bit easier one, and then, somehow or other—I don't

know how it was—I had this affair with Georgey, and somebody told my brothers, and one of them, I never knew which one, told my father. Then they searched my bureau and found Georgey's letters—like a fool I had kept them—and then, I tell you, there was an awful row—a regular dust-up, dear Mrs Markham, and neither poor old Georgey nor I had much choice in the matter. I just held my tongue and pretended I was very much in love with him. I wasn't, but still it was the best policy. Georgey said he was a poor man and couldn't afford to keep a wife, and money matters were arranged—we have plenty of money, as I told you, and my father and brothers got what they were pleased to call a very heavy responsibility off their shoulders—I was the heavy responsibility!"

"I should think you were, and you will be to Georgey if you don't mind."

"I daresay I shall," she said recklessly, "I daresay, but in a case of that kind the man can look out for himself—at all events, Georgey had to. He's like a bear with a sore head whenever he looks at me, but I can't help that, can I now? Georgey needn't have carried on to such an extent, nobody asked him to, goodness knows! And, after all, our carrying on didn't amount to much. I went to tea with him several times in a perfectly open and above-board way at a West End tea shop. I never even took him to my club. You know, fathers and brothers

can make life hard for a girl if they've a mind that way, that's where the beastly injustice of it comes in. There were my brothers, each with a latch key, able to walk in and out of the house when they liked, and I couldn't go to a tea shop with a perfectly harmless fellow like Georgey without having as much row as if I had gone to New Zealand with him. However, as I told my father when I was up for your wedding, they married me to the wrong man, but at the same time they have given me my freedom, a priceless boon for which I am duly grateful. Now I wonder," she concluded, "whether your experience is anything like mine?"

"Goodness me! No!" I replied promptly, "that it certainly is not."

"Ah, well, you're a lucky girl to get the man of your choice," she said, heaving a very doleful sigh which ill accorded with the curves of her smiling mouth, "you are a lucky girl. Thirty thousand a year and the handsomest man in the regiment! Why, Captain Markham will have the command one of these days."

"I daresay he will if we remain soldiering."

"Oh, is there any likelihood of your leaving?"

"I don't think there is—now."

Then tea was brought in, and I ministered to her as a hostess should.

"I wish you and Georgey got on better," I said when we were once more alone. "One never knows

what the future will bring forth, perhaps you'll get really fond of each other later on."

"Well, you know, as my old nurse used to say, 'Pigs may fly, but they are unlikely birds,'" was her startling response. "You see, I am not of a very spoony or responsive nature," she explained, "not like some girls who are always yearning to be petted and taken care of. I don't want to be taken care of, I want to be let alone to go my own way. As for Georgey, he's done very well for himself; he hunts three times a week, and has everything that money can give him—to a limited extent—and if he didn't get the girl he wanted that was no fault of mine. You would never have married Georgey if he hadn't married me."

"It does seem unlikely," I said.

What a liar I felt! Somehow I could never let my mind slip back to that fatal day from whose awkwardness and misery my faithful Dick had rescued me, without my cheeks flaming and my eyes dropping abashed before even the gaze of my own soul. My confusion was evidently not apparent to Mrs Georgey, she was fully occupied with her tea-cup and her own thoughts, and sat there smiling broadly as if she were the happiest wife in Christendom that day. Suddenly she looked up at me.

"I suppose he gave you that on your wedding-day?"

"My brooch? Oh, yes, my husband gave it to me."

"It's awfully nice," she said ; "it's something more than that, it's true and tender, and a pretty attention. Now Georgey has never paid me any attention like that. Not that my great mouthful of a name would look well in diamonds, it would look ostentatious—no less. But your dear little name, Kit, it looks so well and so chummy."

"It looks what it is, we *are* chums."

"That's no nice," she said. "I shall never be chums with Georgey, never. I feel I could be chums with you, you know, Mrs Markham ; I should like to be. Were you christened Katherine ?"

"Yes."

"That's a sweet name too. I hate Emmeline, it's so fine, such a mouthful, and I've always been called Emmeline, I've never been let to forget it."

"Oh, it's a very nice name."

"I'm glad you think so. Anyway, it's no use grumbling about it at this time of day. I tell Georgey that every day of my life."

"But does Georgey grumble about your name ?"

"Oh, no, I don't mean that, I don't suppose he likes it any better than I do. But about grumbling generally—he is *such* a grumbler. I say, Mrs Markham, I wish you'd call me Emmeline, ugly as it is."

"Oh, don't you think it is a little early to begin to be so intimate? We know so little of each other."

"That's a snub," she said. "Well, I'm used to it; Georgey snubs me every day. He says I shall never go down with these people round about Northtowers. But I go down with the men, and have a very good time even if I don't get on with the women. Ah, here's your husband, the gay and gallant bridegroom."

Dick came in as she spoke.

"Good morning, Mrs Vancourt," he said. "What did I hear you say? I'm certainly gay, and I hope I'm gallant."

"I'm sure you are both. I have been pouring out all my ideas wholesale to your wife. We agree on every point; don't we?"

"I don't think we disagreed," I admitted.

"Well, we sha'n't have time to agree or disagree very long, for there are three carriages coming up the drive. What a comfort it must be to have a drive and be able to see people coming up. To tell you the truth," she added, as a resounding knock rang through the house, "to tell you the truth, I never so thoroughly appreciated a house with a side-door as I appreciate the house where we live at this moment. When I see somebody coming to call who is starchy, or who only comes as a duty, I put on my things and go through that side-door as if the Bogey Man were coming round the corner."

CHAPTER XIV

THE HIDDEN CASKET

"In a time of suspense there is a distinct relief in knowing the worst."

THAT visit of Mrs Vancourt's gave me food for much reflection. I felt that I should have to be like Agag, and walk delicately, for if Georgey Vancourt was going to make a great display of his blighted affection, things might become very unpleasant between Dick and myself. You see, I had written Georgey a good many letters, and I had written them without being very careful as to what I said in them. I wondered whether he had kept them, or whether he had been sufficiently honest to destroy them before his marriage. Now, had he?

Well, I found out something about it before many days had gone by. We happened to meet the Vancourts at a dinner-party at a large country house about five miles from Northtowers. The conversation took one of those general turns which sometimes happen at such gatherings, and was on the subject of the propriety or impropriety of husbands and wives having secrets from one another.

"I'm sure," said our hostess, addressing my husband in honeyed accents, "that you and Mrs Markham have no secrets from one another."

My husband laughed outright. " My dear Lady Margaret, if we have, I profoundly hope they will remain secrets for ever. I always think that the very best line in the marriage service is where it says, ' or for ever after hold its peace '—that's on the subject of secrets," he said.

" I quite agree with you. Of course Reggie and I have no secrets from one another," our hostess cried, beaming down the table on her husband, next to whom I was sitting. Then the fair Emmeline delivered herself of a remark.

" Anybody who looks at me," she said in her loud tones, " can see that I'm a frank and open person, who couldn't keep a secret if my soul depended upon it. I never did and I never mean to try. Now, my lord and master, he's of quite a different turn."

At this Georgey went extremely red, and looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

" I thought I had made a clean breast of most things," he said in very grumpy tones.

" But, at the same time, there is a small casket in your past in the shape of a letter-case which some wives would give their very eyes to look into."

" Oh, rubbish, rubbish ! " he exclaimed.

" Now I ask you, Lady Margaret," the fair Emmeline went on, " does Georgey look as if it were all right? Doesn't he look guilty at this moment ? "

He certainly did, and we all laughed—everybody, indeed, excepting the discomfited Georgey. Then the fair Emmeline turned her gaze upon me. Oh ! such a look, as one would say, “ It’s all right, I’m not going to give you away, but I know pretty well what’s in that letter-case.”

I felt myself turning hot and cold ; a curious swimmy sickness came over me, and for the next moment or two I knew nothing. When I came to myself again I was still holding my champagne glass by the stem, and my left hand was still supporting my chin. I looked mistily round. Nobody had noticed me. Well, I must keep watch and ward over myself, in order that I should not completely give myself away by fainting outright.

The conversation had changed, or rather had been diverted into a somewhat different channel, and they were now discussing the advisability of husbands allowing their wives to know the exact amount of their banking account. Georgey was looking sulkily at nothing ; Emmeline was listening, with a broad grin, to something that her next neighbour was saying, and Dick was sitting back in his chair, looking straight at our hostess with an expression of extreme amusement in his eyes. The discussion does not affect this story, but what followed was very different, and has a distinct connection with it.

I was sitting near to Lady Margaret when the men came in from the dining-room. Lady Mar-

garet got up at once from her seat, leaving me alone. Georgey Vancourt took the opportunity to lunge straight in my direction.

"Gad ! What a chance !" he remarked, dropping heavily into the other corner of the couch on which I was sitting. "Kit, did you think any woman would make such a blithering idiot of herself ? Don't you pity me, being tied to a fool like that ?"

" You chose her," I said in a frigid voice.

" Nothing of the kind. She was foisted on me ; her people were only too glad to get rid of her, glad to settle three thousand a year on her to buy her a husband."

" Georgey," I said, "you ought not to say that, it's downright cad."

" Is it ?" he said sulkily. " Then we are a pair, for what could be more cad than to practically tell everybody that I have some letters of yours that she is dying to read and can't."

" I don't know if it occurs to you, but nothing could be more cad than for you to keep those letters after you have married another woman and I have married another man. I don't think it becomes you to cry 'cad' upon anybody ; it's so much the old case of a man living in a glass house and throwing stones. Not that I mind the letters," I went on superbly. " I was a fool once, I admit it, I tell myself so every minute of the day, but I should have been a worse fool if I had married you—a much worse fool. As it

is, Fate has been very good to me, I have married a man and a gentleman."

"Anybody can be a gentleman who has thirty thousand a year," said Georgey.

He was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, and his eyes fixed on the carpet between his toes, and I could not see the full expression of his face.

"You practically told your wife all about me," I said. "I don't find that exactly well bred. You are sitting there trying to make a tragedy, trying to make me conspicuous, trying to make my husband uneasy, trying to make me uneasy lest my husband should observe us. Make up your mind, Georgey," I said, smiling radiantly—a smile, by the way, that I was far from feeling in my heart—and leaning back so as to flirt my fan as if I were enjoying myself immensely, "it's no use trying on any tragedy with me, I'm much too well satisfied with my lot as it is to be making a fool of myself by looking back with even a sigh of regret to anything that has gone by."

"Rub it in," he said, resting his chin on the palms of his hands and tappingly vexedly with his heels on the floor, "rub it in; that's just like a woman."

"You are fairly adept in the art of rubbing it in yourself, Georgey," I remarked, still hanging on to the smile and the movements of my fan. "By the bye, your wife is going to sing. I didn't know she was musical."

"She isn't," he returned promptly.

He was right enough there. With all the assumption of a great professional artist the fair Emmeline allowed herself to be drawn to the grand piano, and there she stood and sang a rather dainty little song called "A Lesson with the Fan." The use she made of the fan! The use she made of her great languishing eyes, and the still further play she made with her wide smiling mouth!

"Looks like a guinea pig," said Georgey from between the palms of his hands.

Now she didn't look in the least like a guinea pig. "I don't know what you mean," I said frigidly.

"They say if you hold a guinea pig by its tail its eyes will drop out. Look at her," he went on, "she's just whacked an old lady in the eye with her blessed fan. She made a mistake in getting married and coming down here. If her people would have let her get on one of the minor music halls, or, failing that, go round in shows at country fairs, she would have been perfectly happy. In this sort of life she's clean out of it."

"You ought to have thought of that before, Georgey," I said, still smiling.

The company at large, however, seemed greatly to appreciate the fair Emmeline's efforts, and she was pressed to oblige with another specimen of her prowess. She obliged with two more, and then our carriage was announced, and Dick and I made our farewells.

"That's a perfectly awful young woman," said Dick, as soon as we were out in the road.

"Yes, she is awful ; she doesn't mean to be, but she is."

"Have you enjoyed yourself, little woman ?"

"No, I haven't enjoyed myself, not a bit. I would far rather have dined quietly at home with you."

"Would you really ? By Jove ! that's good hearing. Why, I thought you were having ever such a good time."

"Oh, did you ? Well, I wasn't. In the first place, I didn't find Sir Charles highly entertaining at dinner. He told me he'd had a very hard day, having been on the bench all the morning, and round three farms in the afternoon. Then after dinner I never spoke to anybody but Georgey Vancourt."

"You looked all right."

"I'm glad I am such a good actress."

"Poor fellow ! You really ought to be kind to that unfortunate chap."

"I don't see why."

"Oh, think of being tied to a woman like that—think of the women he has associated with all his life, and then think of being tied up to that appalling young woman for life, to have to take her about among the women of his own class."

"Well, he was glad to get her three thousand a year. He hunts three time a week, makes himself extremely disagreeable all round, and, after all, it's not much of a bargain for her."

"No, she would have been much happier in the Whitechapel Road. But, after all, there was a girl at this end, and Georgey left his heart behind when he married the fair Emmeline."

"Men shouldn't marry where their hearts don't lead them."

"No; but by all accounts poor old Georgey didn't have much choice in the matter. I must say I'm thoroughly sorry for him. I wonder," he went on, leaning back, but still holding my hand in his, "I wonder who the girl was. Did you ever see anything going on?"

"Never."

"He never confided in you?"

"Not about any other girl," I replied.

It was true enough, and yet what a liar I was! What an actress I was! What an uneasy, apprehensive, perplexed girl I was!

"Oh, don't let us talk about Georgey Vancourt; he isn't interesting. If he loved a girl at this end he should have married the girl at this end; he wasn't obliged to marry Emmeline Smiley, even if her father and brothers did make a bit of a row. After all, what could they have done?"

"Well, they could have made things hum for Georgey if he had written indiscreet or compromising letters to the girl. A man can't do just as he likes in the army, you know."

"Yes; but having married the girl, he ought to

hold his tongue. What was that line you quoted to-night? ‘Or for ever hold his peace.’ He shouldn’t seize every opportunity of pointing out his wife’s faults and calling her ugly names. I call it cad—I told him so to-night.”

“ Oh—did you? Well, you’ve got a pretty good pluck of your own.”

“ Not at all. I don’t dislike the girl—she’s good-hearted. A bit tossed off, a bit suburban—a towny kind of girl ; you get them like that in South Kensington—all long chains and big fringes, too much fashion, too much scent, too many parlour tricks. But she’s good-hearted, and she has no illusions about Georgey.”

“ Ah, that’s where your illogical femininity comes in. If Georgey expresses *his* views he’s a cad ; if she expresses *her* views she—has no illusions about Georgey.”

“ Dick, that’s most unjust.”

“ It’s true, though. All the same, you and I are not going to quarrel about Vancourt and his wife. I’m sorry for the girl, perhaps more sorry than she is for herself ; but when I look at a creature like that, who offends every sense of taste and dignity that a man can have, I feel that I can never sufficiently thank God for my own little lady wife.”

I—I said nothing. What could I say? Nothing. But my heart sank as I wondered what Dick would say if he could know that the letters in Georgey Vancourt’s hidden casket had been written by me.

CHAPTER XV

PLAIN SPEAKING

"When a man has his back to the wall he is a dangerous animal. When a woman has her back to the wall she is sometimes even more dangerous than man."

IT was not long after this that the Vancourts gave a dinner-party. If by any chance I could have got off accepting it I would have done so gladly, but in a place like Northtowers, where every engagement is known, a refusal would have been to risk more comment than I should have been inclined to encounter.

They gave it at the principal hotel, and they really invited everybody who had shown them the slightest hospitality. It was a funny gathering, for Emmeline had no knowledge of society ways, and was entirely ignorant of the many sets of society which were to be found in and about Northtowers.

"I haven't the smallest idea how I'm going to arrange all these people," she remarked to me three or four days before the festivity ; "all Georgey bargains for is that he shall sit next to you."

"Oh, he cannot do that," I declared hastily. "I'm not a titled woman."

"No, but you are a bride, and the Colonel's

daughter, and he says if he takes Lady Northtowers in you must sit on his other hand."

"And then he'll neglect Lady Northtowers altogether. No, it won't do ; you must stop it."

"My dear girl," she said, "you might as well try to turn a costermonger's donkey as to make my husband change his great mind when he has decided on a certain course. I have argued for all I am worth, but my arguments have been without result of any kind whatsoever."

"Then I shall not come," I said vexedly. "Georgey has no right—I should say, Mr Vancourt has no right to make me conspicuous by putting me out of my proper place. It's an absurd and ridiculous idea to think of sending me in to dinner before all these important county women — titled women and all that."

"I don't see how you are going to get out of it."

"Oh, I shall set my father on to him. If there is a person in the world of whom he is a little in awe, it is his commanding officer."

I was so upset and annoyed that I drove straight off to the Moor House to find my father. Giffard told me that he had just come in, and was changing his clothes.

"All right, Giffard, I'll wait till he comes down," I said quietly.

I sat down in the hall and took up a sporting paper which I found there and began to read. In a few minutes I heard my father descending the stairs.

"Hullo, Kit, is that you?"

"Yes, Daddy, it is. I wanted to consult you about something."

"Yes? I hope you haven't been quarrelling with Markham."

"Oh, no, of course not. How silly! As if I should. But something very annoying has just come to my knowledge and I want you to help me out with it."

"Dear, dear, what's that?"

"Those silly Vancourts are going to give a dinner-party. She has just been to see me, and has shown me her list, and, if you please, with half the titled women in the neighbourhood going, Georgey Vancourt insists that I shall sit next to him. Will you speak to him about it?"

"Dear, dear, dear! What possesses the boy? Why didn't you tell his wife?"

"I did tell his wife. She doesn't know anything about decent society at all; she seemed to think it rather a joke, said I was the Colonel's daughter, and ought to have the place of honour. You will speak to him about it, won't you?"

"I certainly will, but I sha'n't be there myself."

"Won't you? I thought you had accepted."

"I'm going away. The fact is, Kit, I'm—I'm—you see—I'm—"

"Oh, you are going to be married, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And you're not going to ask us to the wedding?"

"Oh, yes, dear child, of course, of course ; it's not quite that, but naturally I want to see her, and she wants to see me. We are not going to be married for about six weeks."

"Daddy, dear," I said, pulling him down on to the high-backed settle beside me, "do you know you haven't told me who the lady is."

"Haven't I really? Well, you see, when a man gets to my time of life—"

"Oh, Daddy, your time of life! Why, you're quite young."

"Oh, yes, quite young, quite young, a mere boy. But I don't feel like it, I feel as if I would like to have it all over very quietly. Well, to put it in a nutshell, I am going to marry Lady Henry Scrope."

"Lady Henry Scrope! Well, Daddy, I'm sure she's very nice and very smart; I'm sure she will make you a very nice wife. It might have been much worse than that!"

"My dear child," he said in rather offended tones, "you don't suppose I want to marry a monstrosity, do you?"

"Well, Daddy, dear," I said, "I thought there was some question about money. Will she be known as Lady Henry Scrope, or Mrs Owen?"

"She says she will prefer to be called Mrs Owen ; she says my name will be good enough for her."

"Well, that's very decent of her. Do you mean to ask us to the wedding?"

"As if I could do anything without your help! But, my dear child, I must go now, I'm overdue as it is."

"Oh, I didn't come to stop, don't flatter yourself, Daddy. I'm late by at least half an hour, and Dick will wonder what has got me. You won't forget to speak to that ridiculous Georgey Vancourt?"

"No, I won't forget; but I say, Kit," and he dropped his voice, for we had reached the door of the carriage, "why this sudden interest in you?"

"Oh, there's nothing that featherhead won't do."

"But I thought there was another girl."

"I don't want to know anything about Georgey Vancourt, he bores me to extinction. His wife isn't bad, she means well and all that, and, anyway, she isn't the desolate bore that he has let himself grow into."

I waved my hand, and the next moment we were bowling along the road. I felt that I should have to be very wary; even my father was beginning to see daylight through the mists of the past.

The next day I got a little note from Daddy saying that he had spoken to Georgey Vancourt, and that I needn't worry myself, he had made everything all right. An hour later, when I was walking down High Street, I ran plump into Georgey himself.

"Was it necessary to set your father on to me?" he began reproachfully.

"Well, I think it was. I couldn't run the risk of letting you send me in second to dinner under the circumstances."

"A man should be able to take in the guests whom he delights to honour, or to have them put in a position that seems to him most honourable."

"Yes, that's all very well, but when you are in this kind of society you have to regulate all these little matters strictly according to etiquette. Nobody knows that better than you do. Your wife doesn't seem able to rule the roost and arrange things as they ought to be, so I was determined that I wouldn't be caught napping. As you had made use of my position as my father's daughter in order to send me in out of my proper turn, I thought it perfectly fair to make use of my father to tell you that it wouldn't do."

He heaved a deep sigh. "How hard you are on me, Kit."

"Oh, don't call me Kit, and don't talk about my being hard on you, it's crass nonsense. You've got a charming wife, why can't you make the best of it, and of her?"

"There isn't any best," he said sulkily.

"Nonsense, she's a charming girl, infinitely too good for you. You married her; you ought to be man enough to stick to her. At all events you ought not to set everybody talking about me, and ruin my life."

"Why, you know perfectly well that I wouldn't hurt a hair of your head."

"No, I don't suppose you would, but you are doing your best to spoil my relations with my husband."

"You are awfully hard upon me. I know why it is, it's because I didn't let you know in time that day. I couldn't. I did my best; I assure you I did."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that day when we were going to Idleminster to be married."

"It's no use talking about that. I told you I didn't mean to go."

"But you did go," he said in a tone of triumph, "you did go."

"Yes, you are quite right, I did go; I went with my father."

"But *did* you go with your father? That's news to me."

"It doesn't matter whether it is news to you or not. I went to Idleminster to the sale of horses, and lunched with my father and five or six of the others."

"Yes, and your engagement was announced that day. But you didn't go with your father, and you got engaged in Idleminster station or in Idleminster streets—it was sprung upon everybody. We are close to the little cake shop," he said, looking round, "come in and let me give you some tea."

"I don't want you to give me any tea ; I don't want to have anything to do with you. I don't want to come to your dinner-party, I hate coming, but I think it would look more remarkable to refuse, and I haven't got any excuse that I could decently make."

"Am I so hateful to you ?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I hate you ; I hate the sound of your voice, the sound of your name, everything about you, and I am heartily sorry for the unfortunate girl you have married. I don't want to see anything of you—I shall have to because we are in the same regiment."

"You will have to because I choose you shall."

"What do you mean, Georgey ?" I asked.

"What do I mean ?" he echoed bitterly. "Simply this, that I have been fairly done out of the woman I wanted to marry. Markham wouldn't have had a look in if it hadn't been that I was handicapped elsewhere."

"Oh, you flatter yourself," I said with a sneering laugh.

"Do I ? Shall I tell you something ? Markham asked me in a joking kind of way who the other girl was, and how she had taken it. Markham doesn't know that you were the other girl."

"No, and you can't tell him," I said quietly.

"Why not ?"

"Because, my dear Georgey, it wouldn't suit your

book to be cut by every man in the regiment, to be sent to Coventry, to be called a cad and a black-mailer—which you would be if you bandied my name about too freely. Besides, I should deny it absolutely."

"You can't; I've got your letters."

"Oh, are you threatening me with those—and you are a man of honour!"

"No, I'm nothing of the kind, I've no such pretensions."

"That's just as well," I said quietly. "However, I want, George Vancourt, to relieve your mind. You said quite truly when you told me that my husband does not know that *I* was the girl at this end of the journey, that girl about whom there has been so many conjectures, that girl about whom curiosity has been so rife among you men who regard curiosity as a feminine quality. But he *shall* know, as soon as I go in he shall know, for I will tell him, and then, George Vancourt, I wouldn't stand in your shoes for something."

For a moment he looked hard at me, and then his eyes fell before mine.

"I never said I should tell Markham," he muttered sulkily.

"Didn't you? Then it was something very nearly like saying that. You implied that if I didn't philander with you, you would make use of my letters. You yourself said you had letters of mine. Make

what use you like of them, blazon them to the world, but they are my letters still."

"You have mine," he said in his most sullen tones.

"Have I? Not one word in your handwriting, thank God for it!"

"I suppose you didn't care for me enough to keep them?"

"I didn't, you are quite right; and if I had done so, if I had cared, do you think I should have kept them to hold over your wife's head? You and I *did* have an affair in the past, I *was* fond of you, but you and I made a mistake, we should never have suited each other, not after I found you out for what you were, George Vancourt."

"What do you mean?" he blustered.

"I mean that I have lived all my life among men of honour. I had a little touch of insanity when I took you for one. You have threatened me to-day—the woman you pretend to have loved. Pooh! You don't know the meaning of the word, as love really is."

"Like Markham, I suppose."

"Leave my husband out of the discussion, if you please. I have nothing to say against your wife, I will hear nothing against my husband. I'm going home now," I went on pitilessly, "to apprise him of the whole state of affairs between you and me. I don't wish your company, be good enough to walk the other way, and from to-day please to remember

that, so far as you and I are concerned, we are strangers."

"You are going to cut me?" he said hoarsely.

"No, I'm not going to honour you that far. I'm going to bow to you, and in society I will go so far as to speak to you, but this is the last time I am going to stand in the street talking to you."

I turned on my heel and walked away with a quick, firm footstep. I don't know what happened to him, or where he went, for I never turned my head, even though, as I reached the corner of the street, I met two of our officers, who pulled up to pass the time of day with me.

CHAPTER XVI

I BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND

"Sometimes in the most unpromising and flighty people one finds a depth of sincerity which one had never suspected."

WHEN I parted from the two young men I turned in the direction of home, but before I got to the end of the street I remembered that I should not find Dick if I went back, for he had gone, rather unwillingly, to help to mark out the course for the coming point to point races, and I knew that I need not expect him back very early. So it was of no use to go home to make a clean breast of what had happened, and I did not feel inclined to go back to think about things till Dick should come home. There were a dozen houses open to me that afternoon, so I went to the nearest and gayest, and there I put in the time very comfortably, and, indeed, had it not been for the sword of Damocles hanging over my head, I should have enjoyed myself very much. At last, when I could put off the evil moment no longer, I went home. I had to go through the town again, so I took a cab that had brought somebody up, and drove back. Dick had not arrived, but Griffiths, our butler, handed me a note which he said had come by

special messenger, and was to be delivered into my own hands. I saw in a moment that the address was in Georgey's handwriting. I tore it open almost with a feeling of relief.

"For God's sake," he said, "don't tell Markham a word. I was mad this afternoon; I think I *am* mad. I will never transgress again. Pity and forgive your broken-hearted" G. V."

There was a fire burning in the inner hall, which was a larger and much more important apartment than the square, unpretending entrance to the Moor House, and I sat down there, still holding the note and envelope in my hand, wondering what I had better do. Should I keep my word and tell Dick? Would it make any difference to Dick if he knew? Would he blame me for having hidden the facts for so long? Would he rather know them? For the life of me I could not decide. And while I sat there I heard the sound of horses' hoofs and then my husband's cheery voice on the doorstep. Without stopping to think, I dropped the note and envelope into the heart of the great fire, and taking up the poker, I turned one of the logs so as to press it down and make it burn the quicker.

"Oh, you are at home," said Dick as he entered the inner hall.

"Yes, but I haven't been at home very long."

I tried to make my voice sound as natural as I could. I'm afraid it was a very poor pretence, but he did not seem to notice any difference in me.

"You are back early, Dick," I said.

"No, not very; I hadn't much inducement to stay away any longer than I was obliged to."

"You settled everything?"

"Oh, yes, it was easy enough. Our only difficulty was to get a different course from last year. By the way, I happened across Lord Idleminster. They are asking us to go there to stay for a few days."

"Oh, I should love it."

"Yes, I told him you would. He said he believed Lady Idleminster had actually written to you. Have you seen your letters?"

"Er—no."

"Griffiths, Griffiths!" cried my husband, "any letters?"

"No, sir, only the one I gave Mrs Markham."

For a moment my very blood seemed to stand still in my body.

"Oh, that was not a social letter, dear, only a note."

"Oh, I see."

I left him to think it was from a dressmaker or a milliner, or someone of that kind. He expressed no curiosity, and I did not enlighten him, but I felt—but perhaps you know from experience what I felt, though, for your own sake, reader, I hope you don't.

"Oh, I daresay you'll get it to-night or in the

morning." He sat down on the lounge beside me. "Heigh-ho!" he said, "I'm tired. Do you know, Kit, getting married blots out all that made your life before."

"Does it? I don't find it so; I wish I did."

"Why—what do you mean?" he said, sitting upright and looking at me quite sharply.

"What do you mean, Dick, by 'blotting out'?" I said, putting his question on one side.

"Well, I've always taken the deepest interest in things that don't interest me any more. This afternoon I—I felt it was a bore and a nuisance having to go out about the point to point course. In other days I went with the keenest pleasure; *now* my keenest pleasure is getting back to you. Now I'll be bound you don't feel like that. Where did you go?"

"Well, if I tell you the truth," I replied, "I was in the town, and I was coming home as swiftly as my legs would carry me with the object of finding you, when I suddenly remembered that you had gone out and wouldn't be back till ever so late, and as I couldn't face coming home to an empty house and waiting for you, I went to tea at Mrs Majendie's."

"Oh, did you? Well, you might have made a worse choice," he remarked prosaically. "Much of a crowd?"

"Oh, yes, rather a crowd—people doing things."

"Any of our fellows there?"

"Yes, several of them."

"Did the fair Emmeline turn up?"

"I didn't see her. She might have been there before I got there."

"I suppose you've heard the latest about her?"

"No, I've heard nothing about her. Have you?"

"Yes, it will be lucky for that young woman if she doesn't come a cropper."

"Why?"

"Because she's running the heaviest of heavy affairs with young Jenkinson of the Blankshire Regiment."

"You don't say so! How extremely foolish of her. All the same, Dick, I haven't seen them together."

"Well, I have," he said quietly, "I have. I saw them this afternoon, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, did you? Where?"

"Well, they were walking down a country lane on the Petrington Road, looking quite happy and extremely spoony."

"Dick!"

"But that is the state of the case," said Dick, quietly.

"Why, Georgey's better than that," I said.

"You haven't much opinion of Georgey."

"No, I always told you I had no opinion of him; I think he's a stupid, detestable, horrid boy. Still, he married the girl, and he ought to stick to her."

He's got her money, she's given him everything he wanted in the world, and I think it would be only decent if he were to stick to her. Why, they've only been married a few months."

"Well, never mind, Kit," he said, "the world has gone wrong for some people ever since it was made, and you and I have got enough to do to mind our own business without bothering ourselves about the affairs of others. And, do you know, young woman, that we are dining at the Stratton's to-night, and that we have just half an hour to get dressed in?"

So my opportunity for saying anything about Georgey Vancourt and the past went by. I felt quite gay and light hearted as I went up the broad stairs, Dick still holding my hand in his. Mind you, I was not in love with Dick, let there be no mistake on that point, but I liked him; he was clean and manly and wholesome, kind and protective, and to a certain extent I felt lost when he was not there. And yet—it was not love. I think that I had had enough of love to last me some little time—I mean what we call "being in love." I had certainly been in love with Georgey Vancourt. I had watched for a glimpse of his sleek, golden head, his trim, golden moustache, his blue eyes, and his straight, well-cut nose. I had admired everything that he did, and said, and looked, and wore, and even what I imagined he thought. But I had come

to realise that I had been admiring a Dagon, an image of gold with feet of clay, and it had made me suspicious of glitter.

Oh, I hoped, all the time I was dressing, that the Vancourts would not be at the dinner-party, and yet, as soon as I got into the drawing-room, I saw the large smile, the prominent fringe, the languishing eyes and the flirtatious fan of the fair Emmeline.

"I'm a grass-widow to-night," she said, "Georgey's on duty."

I looked at the girl in amazement.

"Oh—oh, is he?"

"Yes, is there anything wonderful about it?"

"How very awkward," I went on. "Why didn't you get him to ask somebody else to take his duty as you had a dinner-party?"

"Oh, there are dinner-parties every day. I wrote to Mrs Stratton about three days ago, saying that she had better not count on Georgey, for he knew he'd be on duty to-day."

I looked round, wondering who had taken his place. Later on I found out.

"Don't say anything to Mrs Vancourt, Kit, dear," said Mrs Stratton, "but there's a very big screw loose there."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Only this, that I asked them to dinner to-night, as you see, and three days ago I got a letter from her saying that Georgey couldn't come because he

would be on duty. Well, he isn't on duty at all."

"No, I know he isn't; I saw him in the town this afternoon."

"I see. Well, it's early days to begin that sort of thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is rather. However, my dear Mrs Stratton, the best thing for us is to say nothing at all. I advise you to keep your own counsel. If she finds out it will only make her more reckless."

"I suppose," said Mrs Stratton, in a reflective voice, "that he is still carrying on with the other girl."

"What other girl?"

"Oh, the girl at this end he was so devoted to, and had to give up when the Smiley men came down upon him—you know."

"No, Mrs Stratton, I really don't know."

"But you heard something about it?"

"Yes. Who is she, by the bye?"

"Ah, my dear, that's what every man in the regiment—to say nothing of the women—is trying to find out. But Master Georgey is too wary to let on. As my old nurse used to say, 'He's not so green as he's cabbage looking.'"

I looked across at the fair Emmeline. I was sorry for the girl, yes, I was very sorry for her. She caught my glance and came over to me.

"Well, my dear girl," she said, "how is the world using you?"

I couldn't help it, she *would* be intimate with me ; familiarity seemed to be her chief characteristic ; she could no more help being familiar than she could help breathing.

"Thank you, Mrs Vancourt, the world is using me pretty much as usual."

"Oh, you *are* stiff," she cried ; "pokers aren't in it. Well, I suppose it's the way you were brought up and the way I was brought up. You see me to-night a poor, disconsolate grass-widow."

"Oh, don't say such things."

"But that's what I am. Fancy coming out to a dinner-party of Northtowers swells by my own little self and not minding it. And, oddly enough, I don't mind it one button. You know, of course, that Georgey is on duty."

I cast about in my mind for a likely lie with which to answer her, but she was too quick for me.

"Or perhaps you know," she said, with a comical face, "that he isn't ? Lor', the elaborate means he took to hoodwink me would have made a cat laugh. But I didn't, I expressed the utmost disgust, said how hard it was he hadn't got his troop, and then sat down and wrote a nice little note to Mrs Stratton, who is bursting with a desire to tell me all about it and doesn't like to."

"Hush ! Don't let her hear you laughing."

"Oh, my dear, she thinks I'm the gulled little ill-used wife ; it's as good as a play. Do you know, I

never thought marriage would be such fun as it is."

"Oh, don't talk like that. Don't you care?"

"Not one button. I could have cared, oh, yes, I could have cared, but Georgey began as he meant to go on, and I took my cue from him. When he wants to do what he likes, he makes an excuse and lies to me. When I want to do what I like, I go and do it. That's the difference between us. Waste myself on a man who's pining for another woman? Not me. But she's well rid of him, that woman, only I wonder if she thinks so. Oh—I wish you would let me call you Kit as the others do."

"Then call me Kit," I said.

"Thank you, dear; thank you so much; I take it as the greatest favour. If Georgey had married the girl that everybody's so anxious to find out about—and they all keep pumping me as to her name and all the rest of it—he would have broken her heart in six months. She isn't like me. I take him for what he's worth, go over the whole situation in my mind, make up my mind that I," touching her breast, "—that I am going to have a good time from now to the end of my life. You think I'm reckless, that I shall go over the border one day. Never, my dear, never. Not one word will I put to paper, not one pin's point will I ever go beyond a lark. And as for the others, they can pump, and pump, and pump, but they'll never get that girl's name out of me."

CHAPTER XVII

GRIN OR NO GRIN

"Accustomed miseries are far worse than unusual ones. I have never believed in the truth of the old saying—'Better the devil you do know than the devil you don't.'"

ODDLY enough that little ruse of Georgey Vancourt's, by which he got a whole evening to himself, proved no small blessing to me. Of course it was known all over the regiment the next day that Mrs Georgey had made the excuse that Georgey could not go to the dinner because he would be on duty, and it was patent to everybody that Georgey had not been on duty at all. The gossips, who in a regiment are many, one and all came to the conclusion that he had spent the evening with "the other girl." As I had spent the evening at the dinner, that took all suspicion off my shoulders, and I was not a little thankful therefor.

I found out through this incident that the fair Emmeline, notwithstanding her apparent openness, knew perfectly well when to hold her tongue, and as far as I was able to gather, she never let slip by so much as word or look, to anybody but myself, that she was quite aware of the rottenness of Georgey's excuse.

It happened that day that Dick came home to lunch. He did not always, but made a rule of doing so whenever it was possible. As soon as we were served and Griffiths and his subordinate had left the room, he looked across the table at me.

"Fine old scandal up at the barracks," he said.

"Oh, what about?"

"That young ass Vancourt."

"Oh, what has he been doing now?"

"Well, he wasn't at Mrs Stratton's dinner-party, and he made the excuse through her that he would be on duty. Blessington was on duty yesterday."

"Oh! Where was Georgey?"

"That's what everybody wants to know. I think the young ass has put his foot in it. Stratton is furious about his wife being put off in that way; he's in two minds as to whether he will make an official row about it."

"Oh—and has it transpired where Georgey was?"

"No, I suppose he was with the other girl—at least that's the general opinion. I must say," he went on, crumbling a piece of bread in a reflective manner, "in a way it's a revelation to me."

"Why?"

"Oh, because I thought—"

Then he broke off short, with a sharp glance at me, and began crumbling his bread again.

"What did you think, Dick?"

"Oh, nothing."

"But you were going to say something."

"Well, I was ; I was going to say that I thought I had an inkling as to the identity of 'the other girl.' But I was mistaken, and last night was a fair proof of it."

So Dick had suspected me all along !

"Well," I said, when the pause between us had become painful, on my side at least, "I'll tell you frankly and candidly what I think. And it is that His Majesty's Royal Regiment of Dragoons, better known as the White Horse, are making a very great deal more fuss about Lieutenant George Vancourt than is necessary. After all, he's only a subaltern. The circumstances of his marriage were disgraceful, though perhaps all the world doesn't know that as well as we do. His wife is making herself perfectly happy in her own way, and *I* think the White Horse might find some topic of conversation more interesting and more profitable."

"Which," said Dick, with a quizzical look at me, "is about the severest snub that I have ever had administered to me."

"If the cap does not fit, my dear sir," I remarked, resting my elbows on the table and looking at him over the tips of my fingers, "you need not be so very careful in putting it on."

"Oh, it fits," he said, "it fits ; I cry *par*."

And that very afternoon I met Georgey. We went to a typical tea-fight, the kind of gathering the young

bloods in Northtowers described as a "muffin worry," and thought themselves very manly in using the term. Well, I had been in the house where the party was given about ten minutes, and had enjoyed a little talk with my hostess, when she said, "Now, dear Mrs Markham, you must go in and have some tea."

She looked round in quest of somebody to be my escort, Dick having been laid hold of by an important old dowager the moment he entered the room.

"Ah, here is Mr Vancourt," she said in her most mellifluous accents. "Do take Mrs Markham to have some tea, Mr Vancourt; she's positively starving."

"I shall be only too delighted," he replied, and I must do him the justice to admit that he said it as if he meant it.

I had no decent excuse for refusing, so I walked out of the room beside him.

"What luck!" he said in a fierce whisper; "I wasn't hoping for such luck as this."

"It *has* been a fine day," I cried.

"Kit," he went on in a fierce undertone, "don't try me too far; for God's sake, don't."

"Yes, it *was* hard you couldn't go to Mrs Stratton's last night," I said, determined that I wouldn't be a party to any conversation having a tragic tendency.

"Kit," he said, as we reached the door of the dining-room, "is that all you have to say to me?"

"Do you know, I always take coffee."

"I'll get you coffee," he said savagely.

"Thank you *so* much," I said in my sweetest tones.

He found me a seat on a chair in the extreme corner of the room, and remarked as he left me, in quite ordinary tones, that I might try to keep the chair next to me for him. I put my muff down upon it, and my hand upon that.

"I'll keep it," I said.

He catered for me very well, brought me coffee swimming with cream, and an array of the smartest little sandwiches and sweet things arranged round the saucer.

"You see, I haven't forgotten your taste. There is one lump in that."

Yes, he had remembered that I took one lump in coffee and none in tea, and in spite of myself my heart gave a sick throb as I realised it. In a moment or two he came back carrying quite a respectable meal for himself.

"Do you know, Kit," he said, "they have got a speciality in this house."

"Have they?"

"Yes, they have excellent ices. You must have one when you've finished that."

It was very curious that Dick never ordered me about, never said "You mustn't do this" or "You mustn't do that." From the first he had treated me as a person with a mind of my own, with likes and dislikes—a person to be consulted. Georgey always took things for granted. He sat quietly for a minute

or two, disposing steadily of buttered muffin and anchovy sandwiches. Then I felt, without seeing him, that he was looking straight at me.

"Kit, it is so good to be near you again."

"Oh, don't begin all that over again."

"I won't, and yet it *is* good to be near you again. There's something so restful, so comforting about you."

I drank the rest of my coffee before I answered him.

"It's too late in the day to think of that now, and—I want some more coffee."

He got up with a sigh, and took my cup and his own and got them replenished.

"You won't go upstairs for a long while," he said ; "you've got to eat an ice after that."

"I've got to if I want to," I said rather tartly. Then I turned round quickly and looked at him. "Georgey," I said, "why didn't you go to the dinner-party last night ?"

"Why didn't I ? Well, I felt I couldn't stand it. I thought it more than likely I should be on duty, and it's ten chances to one I should have been if I had arranged to go ; then I should have had to get out of it somehow and made her rotten dinner-party thirteen at table. It isn't safe to ask a subaltern and his wife to a dinner-party, and I hate Mrs Stratton—you know I do."

"No, I don't ; I think she's rather a nice woman."

"I don't agree with you. Do you remember what Stratton was like before he married her ? He

was a jolly old chap. Gad ! There's nothing jolly about him now. Then there's another thing. The Missus enjoys going about alone much better than going about with me."

" Yes, but it isn't right."

" Which ? For her to enjoy it, or for me to let her enjoy it ?"

" Either. Where did you dine ?" I inquired.

" Dine ? I went to the Golden Star. I had a dinner all to my little self off roast goose and onions."

" Oh, Georgey ! "

He laughed wickedly, and I knew that he was embroidering a little.

" I did. I didn't have roast goose and onions, but I had a little dinner all to myself, and then I went out and talked to the barmaid, and a ripping smart girl she is. Then I went into the billiard-room, and I played billiards with a commercial traveller in chemicals, and lost two pounds. But he was a decent chap, I didn't grudge it."

" Chemicals !" I repeated.

I had no reason for remarking what the gentleman travelled in, it was all one to me whether he travelled in chemicals or in agricultural implements, but Georgey caught me up at once.

" As a matter of fact," he said, " I found that this chap was a traveller for my precious father-in-law's firm. Oh, you didn't know they were chemicals ? Well, they are, all sorts of queer things,

nitrates, aniline dyes, and other evil-smelling compounds. Gad ! He played a ripping good game of billiards ; he could have given that father-in-law of mine and his louts of sons ninety up and walked away from them. I was quite proud to lose a couple of pounds to him. The Missus told me when she came home that the dinner-party went off very well. Did it ? ”

“ Of course it did when your wife tells you it did. Besides, Mrs Stratton is very good at dinner giving —you know that.”

“ Oh, I didn’t mean to ask if the soup was burnt, or the bread-sauce chunky, I mean as regards the people.”

“ Oh, they were right enough. It would have been better if you had been there.”

“ Do you really think so ? ”

His tone was gratification itself, but I hastened to nip that little flower in the bud.

“ I don’t mean in that sense, Georgey ; it didn’t matter tuppence to me whether you were there or not, but there was a good deal of comment about your having made the excuse through your wife of duty, and the Strattons are very huffy about it.”

“ I don’t think Mrs Stratton is likely to make herself disagreeable.”

“ No, but he may.”

“ Well, if he does, I can soon shut him up. If he *is* well up the list of captains, that is no reason why he should make himself objectionable to a

British subaltern anyway. It was just this, Kit, I wanted a night off, I wanted to get away from that eternal grin of Emmeline's. She's a good-natured creature, really sweet-tempered to the last point, but she has some appalling tricks."

"You should try to cure her of them if she has," I said judicially.

"Oh, that unresponsive grin from ear to ear that people think is all good nature! Ugh!"

"Georgey, you really ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Yes, but that grin has got on my nerves—I swear to you she wakes up grinning."

I shook out my furs and put my tea-cup on the chair next to mine.

"I must go upstairs now."

"No, don't go yet, this is such a nice comfortable corner, and I haven't had a comfortable talk to you for ages."

He had got a firm grip of my dress, and I couldn't get up without making a scene.

"Well, don't talk about your wife."

"No, I won't; she's really not interesting enough to talk about."

"But she is your wife," I said with a great assumption of dignity.

"Yes, yes, and it's a great pity she is my wife. Still, all the same, I wanted an evening off, I wanted to eat my dinner quietly."

"Surely you dine at mess sometimes? You dine at mess when you are on duty—legitimately on duty."

"Yes, but it's not like the stolen pleasure of really getting a night off. I haven't enjoyed a dinner so much since I was married. But why did you ask? Has Emmeline been talking to you about me?"

"More or less."

"What did she say about me?"

"Oh, Georgey, I can't tell you that. You probably know exactly what she thinks about you. It's lucky for you she's under no particular illusions about you."

"Illusions? No, there are no illusions about Emmeline. She's thoroughly matter of fact, and an up-to-date little Cockney. She has never cared a brass farthing for me, and has never pretended to."

"And you?" I asked.

"Oh, well, of course I couldn't care for Emmeline. All the love I ever had—"

"I think I'll go upstairs, Georgey."

"All the love I was capable of giving any woman," he went on doggedly, "I gave to you."

"I can't listen to you." I got up resolutely this time.

"But you haven't had your ice."

"No, and I'm not going to have it. If I want one, I will get Dick to give it to me."

"But you can't alter the fact that, Dick or no Dick,

Emmeline or no Emmeline, grin or no grin, you and I were made for each other."

" Well, perhaps—that's as may be. But whether we were made for each other or not, Georgey, you and I have somehow got hitched on to other teams. We can arrange these little matters, you know, but we can't rearrange them. But I have stayed here long enough, I don't want to make myself more conspicuous than need be. Everybody is so keen to find out who the girl is at this end of the journey, the girl you were in love with, or thought you were—or thought that she was—you know—and I don't want anyone, excepting Dick, to drop down to the truth."

" Why do you say 'excepting Dick' ? "

" Ah, well, of course, he is different."

" You don't mean to say that you told him ? "

" Never mind."

" How much did you tell him ? "

" Never mind how much I told him. But he has no illusions about you, Georgey. In that he's a match for the fair Emmeline."

" There wasn't any need to tell him anything," he said crossly.

" Think not? I don't altogether agree with you. And you yourself have not been over discreet. If nobody else guesses just how the land lies, your wife knows it to a nicety."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHY? WHY?

"A woman with a grievance is bad enough; but a man with a grievance is very much worse. When he happens to be a young man, he is mostly intolerable."

THEY say that there is a special providence which watches over children, drunkards and fools. I was not a child, and I was certainly no drunkard, and if I was not then a fool, undoubtedly I had been one, and I stood in special need of that providence which watches over such. My presiding deity that day was very good to me, for, as I drew my sables up round my shoulders, and thrust my hands deep into the recesses of my muff, I saw my husband coming across the hall.

"Get up quickly," I said in an imperative tone to Georgey, "Dick is coming."

He jumped up from his chair as if he had been shot, and as Dick's tall figure filled up the doorway, we were already walking across the room.

"Oh, you're here," he said, in his pleasant easy tones. "I wondered what had got you."

"I've been having a great tea with this young man," I said.

"But you never had your ice, Mrs Markham."

It was the first time that he had ever directly called me "Mrs Markham," and I took it as a sign of grace.

"No, Georgey, I didn't have my ice, but now Dick has come he will give me one, and you can go and look after your wife."

Thus dismissed, he had no choice but to make the best bow that his chagrin would permit, and leave us.

"Do you really want an ice?" asked Dick.

"Yes, I really do."

"Why didn't you have one before?"

"I did mean to, but Georgey Vancourt waxed so very confidential over his matrimonial troubles that I cut it short, and said that I must come and look for you."

"What, has it got to that?" said Dick, contemptuously.

"Oh, yes, and much more than that. But don't waste time talking about him; get me an ice, and one for yourself. It will be like old times, sitting in a corner and eating ices together."

"Well, my dear child, if sitting in a corner eating ices is any treat to you—"

"Yes, I know, we could go down to a tea shop and make ourselves ill on them. But it is sitting in a corner eating ices at a party with one's husband that is—how shall I put it?—such a joke."

He turned away with a laugh, and I once more took possession of the very chair on which I had been sitting before. In two minutes Dick came back

with the desired delicacies, and settled himself in the corner chair.

"There's a sight outside," he remarked, as he took his first spoonful of ice, "that would make the very angels weep."

"The fair Emmeline again?"

"Oh, my dear child, that awful woman!"

"Oh, come, she's not so bad."

"My dear, she's dreadful. She's sitting on the stairs now, well up from the level of the hall, with six youngsters; they're playing some silly game or other. 'Pon my word, she makes me think of Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday."

"Well, for my part, I don't wonder," I said quietly. "She was pushed into marrying Georgey, and Georgey bitterly repents him of his bargain. He says her grin has got on his nerves."

"Poor chap!" said Dick.

"Yes, but as I reminded Georgey, probably the whole of him has got on hers. There, now I have finished. Let us go into the drawing-room."

I took a look at Emmeline as we went. Yes, Dick was right, she really was making an exhibition of herself. I took no more than a glance at her, but hurried past into the drawing-room, and there was Georgey, with the expression of a martyr, listening to a young lady who was doing something, for they all "did things" in Northtowers. We soon slipped away after this, for, to tell the truth, I was glad to get away

from Georgey's vicinity, and equally glad to get away from the chance of seeming to be intimate with Emmeline. I did not see them again till the evening of their dinner, which, owing to my father's interference and prompt action, had nothing disagreeable to mar its fair harmony. The fair Emmeline made a good hostess. She had got somebody local to coach her in the making of her list, and nobody was put out or the least offended. I pitied Georgey, because he had two such very solemn old ladies to talk to during dinner. And both of them were so fully alive to the dignity of their position, that they left nothing to chance in the matter of their host, but exacted to the last point every shred of attention which should be given to them.

And after dinner, very soon after the ladies had left the table, the men joined us. Then Emmeline came and announced to Lady Northtowers, to whom I happened to be talking, that she hated and loathed being beholden to her friends for entertaining each other, and that she had engaged people to come down from London to give us one or two little shows. She had a lightning artist, a musical sketch, and an extremely clever conjurer, and the evening went off better than I had imagined such an evening could possibly have done.

"Don't you think, Kit," said Emmeline to me in a tone of triumph, "that I was wise in my day and generation. Never leave these things to chance and

amateurs. Pay somebody, my dear, pay them a good fee, and give them a good supper, pay them well, and then you know where you are. Georgey wanted me to have some Miss Violet—Violet—Miss Violet Bennington, I think that was the name."

"Oh, yes, Miss Violet Bennington is very well known in Northtowers."

"A horrid bore, my dear; I should have had to ask her to dinner just to get her to do something. I didn't want to ask her to dinner, I only wanted those who had been civil to me. One doesn't waste a dinner on a girl because she can sing a song or two. Besides," she went on, "I hate these local celebrities, they give themselves such airs. I met a man the other day who sings comic songs."

"Oh, Mr Cosgrove, you mean?"

"Yes, that was the name," she said in acquiescence, "and I must say that, though I've known some of the brightest stars of musical comedy and the music halls, I've never known a man before who gave himself the airs of Mr George Cosgrove. I'd forgive him for his airs if he were funny, amusing—but he isn't, he's only soppy and conceited."

"Well, anyway, Emmeline," I said, "you've had a splendid success with your dinner, so that no one can give you points in that respect, and I congratulate you most heartily. I'm sure everybody was delighted."

"Oh, they seemed pleased enough," she said prosaically, "except poor old Georgey; he looked as glum

as glum, and quite like a rose between two thorns."

"Oh, Emmeline!"

"They were such very starchy old ladies," she protested. "By the bye, Kit, how did you get Georgey to forego the pleasure of taking you in to dinner, or, at least, of having you sitting next to him?"

"It was difficult," I said quietly, "and I didn't manage it at all, my father did."

"Your father!"

"Yes. I guessed from what you told me that Georgey was obstinately inclined, so I took the shortest way out and set my father on to him."

"Oh—I see," she remarked in a comprehensive tone, "I see. I wondered how you'd managed it."

Now all that evening I really did not exchange two words with Georgey Vancourt beyond saying "How d'you do" and "Good-bye," and he had no opportunity of making conversation with me. But a regiment is, after all, only like a big family, and it is impossible to get very far out of the way one of another; indeed, at the very next dinner-party that we went to, which was at a big house some miles out of Northtowers, I found myself placed next to Georgey at dinner. I was not sent in with him, oh, no! I was too important a person for that, but I found him placed on my right hand, a fact of which I became aware before I had actually taken my seat.

"By Jove! isn't this luck," said a voice at my elbow, and, looking aside, I saw Georgey.

"Oh, is that you?" I said.

"'Pon my soul, Kit," he said in disgusted accents, "you're far from complimentary."

"God forbid I should ever be complimentary to you, Georgey Vancourt, now or at any other time," I returned promptly.

"There seems little fear of it," he rejoined grumpily.

Well, I don't wonder he was grumpy, I daresay I should have been grumpy myself under the circumstances, but, when you come to think of it, it really was annoying that I couldn't go to a dinner-party without finding myself let in for a couple of hours of his extremely uninteresting, not to say tragic, conversation. And, of course, I didn't want any of Georgey's tragedy, it was the one thing that I was most anxious to avoid. I talked as long as I could to my legitimate cavalier, then, unfortunately, the lady on his other hand spoke to him and he turned to her. Georgey, who had evidently been on the watch for such an opportunity, at once twisted round in his chair.

"I say, Kit," he said in cool, confidential tones, "you're looking awfully ill."

"Ill?" I echoed. "I'm not in the least ill."

"You *look* ill, and you look unhappy."

"Unhappy? Oh, what nonsense! I'm not in the

least unhappy. Why, my dear boy, I have everything I want in the world."

He looked at me, from the pair of diamond wings in my hair to the diamonds twinkling on my fingers.

"Yes," he said, "you've done very well for yourself in a worldly sense, much better than if you had married me."

"I might say the same of you, Georgey."

"You might, but you'd be very hard set to find anybody to agree with you."

"Well, we won't go into that, my dear boy, we really won't; we must make the best of it, it's the only thing left for us to do."

"I admire your pluck," he said in gloomy accents ; "or is it that women don't feel these things as men do. If you loved me as I love you—"

"Nothing but death could part us two," I added flippantly. Then I changed my tone. "But why go into all this? Why make life a burden and a vale of tears beyond what is natural and necessary? How wise to make the best of it; how truly plucky not to go back on the past. What is to be gained by kicking against the pricks, and fretting against the knot that your own fingers have tied?"

"Your fingers tied your knot, didn't they?"

"Yes, in a sense they did; but then I don't want to untie it, I'm perfectly satisfied as I am."

"Ah, Markham's had all the luck," he declared in a tone of resignation which ought to have touched

me, but which made me at once angry and inclined to laugh. "Rich beyond the dreams of avarice, good-looking—"

I turned my head quickly and looked at him. Surely Georgey was not seriously inclined to be jealous of Dick's looks! I regretted the movement the moment I had made it.

"You don't think Markham good-looking?" he said eagerly. "You think that I have the pull of him in the matter of looks? So *I* always did—until you married him."

"No," I said in a tone of great deliberation—and mind you, all through the evening I was picking my words as carefully as a man crossing an Alpine pass picks his footsteps—"I don't think Dick good-looking. He's a fine man, stalwart, well-made, typically English, but his face has one unending charm, and he will have that charm as long as he's alive; age will not alter it, time can never efface it, nobody but a fool would ever fail to appreciate it."

"Um—" he said, "and what is this wonderful charm?"

"Well, Georgey, it is the charm of being clean and wholesome and honest. Dick wouldn't do a dirty thing—it isn't in him to do a cowardly or a mean-spirited action, and it would be equally impossible for him to do—things that I have known other men in exactly the same position of life do, and go on living."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? My dear boy, it's time for you and I, since you won't stay under shelter, to go out in the open and fight it out with the gloves off, even to the death."

"Oh, we *are* tragic!"

"No, Georgey, we are not exactly tragic. You know we read that there's a time to work and a time to play, a time to laugh and a time to weep—I may be wrong in my actual quotation, but I have learned lately that, before all things, there is a time to love and there is a time to trust. Now, I can trust my husband; he *couldn't* betray trust, wouldn't if he could, he's incapable of it."

"Rub it in," he said sulkily.

"No need, Georgey, *you* rubbed it in indelibly the morning that you went to London to arrange for your marriage."

CHAPTER XIX

LADY HERMIONE'S DINNER-PARTY

"A dinner-party may be as the two poles—either a long safe period of joy or an eternity of complete boredom."

IN my intercourse with Georgey Vancourt I know, looking back from my present standpoint, that I made a dreadful mistake in what I said to him about his going to London to arrange for his marriage. He caught at my words as the typical drowning man catches at a straw.

"Then you did mean it that day—you *did* go to Idleminster to meet me; my letter did *not* reach you in time! I knew it, I knew it," he went on triumphantly, "I knew it all the time. You went to Idleminster to meet me."

I never before so thoroughly realised the meaning of the phrase "to knock one down with a feather" as at that moment; but as some learned gentleman has said somewhere, "We cannot recall the arrow that has escaped from the bow, or the word that has passed the lips." I had let a very foolish admission escape me, and it was useless to pretend to Georgey that I had meant anything different to what my words actually implied.

"Well," I said defiantly, "and if I did, is it for you to reproach me?"

"Not at all, not at all; God knows that is the last thing on earth that I wish to do. Why should I? But your slip—for it was a slip—has told me something, yes, that your marriage was no marriage of affection, that you married Markham to get out of an unpleasant situation, as a matter of convenience—possibly he blackmailed you into it."

I faced round upon him, forgetting for the moment where I was. "How dare you say that to me?" I gasped, "how dare you? I have called you a cad before and I call you one again. You slander a husband to his wife. It is a trick worthy of you, worthy of a man who spends a girl's money and is not even loyal enough to keep his mouth shut about her! Oh, this is too much."

"But you have told me the truth," he said.

"The truth? Then I'll tell it to you again, and if it was unpalatable to you before, I hope it will be more so this time. If you are nursing any idea, any delusion that I care more for you than for my husband, dismiss the idea from your mind, for it *is* a delusion. I wouldn't change you for my husband if it were to gain the whole world; I wouldn't cherish the smallest little feeling of love for you—wouldn't—oh, I couldn't. Make no mistake, be under no misapprehension, I'm proud to be my husband's wife, and the one regret of my life is that I ever lowered

myself, wasted myself, to fancy that I thought more of you than of him."

I turned quickly to the man on my other hand so as to give him no further chance of continuing the conversation, and as I did so I looked to the other end of the table, and saw my husband's eyes fixed on me with an expression of profound astonishment. He lifted his eyebrows interrogatively and smiled slightly. But I was much too angry to give any answering glance. My eyes fell before his and I felt as if I were blushing to the very roots of my hair. Well might I blush! I could have played Lady Macbeth at that moment, but instead of saying with her, "Not all the perfumes of Araby can whiten this little hand," I should have had to say, "Not all the perfumes of Araby can whiten this stained soul." Oh, it was horrid! I hated tragedy. I much preferred to be quite commonplace, quite ordinary and conventional, and I wished with all my heart and soul that I had never set my eyes on Georgey Vancourt.

Fortunately for me the man who had taken me in to dinner was ready with an interesting and brisk conversation, and I kept my shoulder turned towards Georgey, nor did I once again so much as glance in his direction. It was not till we were on the road home that Dick referred to the look he had given me across the dinner-table.

"I say, Kit," he said, "did you and Vancourt get cross with each other?"

"Yes," I replied.

"What about?"

"Oh, I really can't go into it, I'm tired of Georgey Vancourt. I wish he'd send in his papers, or that you'd send in yours."

"My dear child," he began in a wounded tone.

"Yes, it is as bad as that. I'm thoroughly tired of Georgey Vancourt, his vapours, his maunderings and his spitefulness—oh, it makes me wild to talk about him."

"Then we won't talk about him," he said soothingly, "we won't talk about him. It was only that I thought from the expression of his face that he was annoying you—and I won't allow Vancourt or any other man to annoy you. I don't know," he said, taking hold of my hand as we drove swiftly along, "I don't know what can have put such an idea into my head."

My very heart seemed to grow cold and freeze.

"I don't think I quite understand you, Dick."

"No? Well, what I meant was this, it seemed to me almost as if—really, Kit, I hardly like to say it—it seemed almost as if he were threatening you."

"No, he was bewailing his fate, as usual. *I* haven't anything to do with Georgey Vancourt's fate, and I don't want to. I hate people who whine and yowl when they make a mess of things."

"Of course you do," he said heartily, "of course. Poor young chap, he's got something to yowl about."

"Oh, not half as much as she has. He's a miserable creature, Dick, let us talk about something else."

So we talked about other things, nor did we once again that evening mention the name of Georgey Vancourt. That night I could not get to sleep. I wondered over and over again what was the best course for me to take, whether I should be wiser if I were to make a clean breast of it and tell Dick everything. I had meant to do so; I had more than once tried to do so, but it seemed as if Fate itself was against me. What ought I to do? Oh, it was a most difficult situation, and it was made more difficult because there rang through my brain, in a solemn warning note, three words, "Let well alone." I had been a fool, but I had not been worse than a fool. Why should I give myself away to the man of all others I most wanted to think well of me. After all, Fate had saved me, yes, Fate had saved me. And so I came to the determination that I would keep my own counsel; I would not tell Dick the true history of that day at Idleminster.

The daylight was peeping in at the windows before I closed my eyes, and the natural result of this was that when my morning cup of tea came I awoke with a start, and realised that I had a racking headache. Dick was very full of commiseration.

"I'll try and get a few days' leave, and we'll get away for a little change. I don't think this place altogether suits you!"

Now I knew that the place suited me well enough, but I confess I welcomed the idea of a change as a complete rest from the worry of continually meeting Georgey Vancourt.

Of course it is not easy to get leave even for a few days during the drill season, more especially when a man has had a very long leave for the occasion of his getting married. However, Dick managed it, and we gaily went off to town. The morning after our arrival at home, and I need hardly say that we came down from town by the last train, I had a visit from the fair Emmeline.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "I am so pleased to see you back again. Do you know, I hate this place."

"Do you? Oh, it's not so bad, and, after all, you won't have to bear it for very long; ten chances to one we shall be moved on next month."

"Do you think so? I don't. Georgey says we may be kept here for another year. They are so stuck up, these people. What I complain of is, there is no comic relief in the place."

I thought there was comic relief enough in the person of Emmeline herself, but I could hardly tell her so.

"You have a very good time, my dear girl," I said quietly. "I never see you but you have six young men in your train."

"Oh, come, not so bad as that. What I complain

of is that they all seem to think I ought to be satisfied with the attentions of my legitimate lord and master. Such a dowdy idea! What's the good of being married if you can't have a mash or two? Of course you don't feel it, you are one of themselves."

"Oh, thank you."

"Oh, I mean that you've been brought up to their way of thinking, their little conventionalities don't worry you as they do me. I don't mind owning up frankly that I didn't marry with any high ideals as to duty, and all that sort of thing. I was made to marry Georgey whether I wanted to or not, and I made up my mind there and then, when I acquiesced in the plans my people made for me, that since they wished it so much I would get married, but I would have a ripping good time from then onwards. But high ideals and stodging about like an Indian squaw at Georgey's tail do not appeal to me and never will do. And, after all, Georgey has shown me so very plainly that he did not really want me, I could not for sheer pride hang on to him all the time."

"I shouldn't worry about what people think, Emmeline," I said; "after all, we are birds of passage, we are neither part nor parcel of either the people around here or the people in the town."

"But I do care," she said ingenuously. "I don't want people to think that I was a barmaid, or anything of that sort, because I wasn't."

"No, I know you were not, and I know, too, that there's no harm in you. If you flirted less openly, you might flirt much more dangerously. But, after all, it is rather hard on the local girls when they see a young woman who has made her establishment swallowing up half a dozen of their legitimate young men at one mouthful."

"Oh, poor dears, I never thought of that. But then I'm very good-natured, I never take eligible young men, I only amuse myself with little boys who couldn't marry. I never come between a girl and her man; I never did such a thing in my life; and, after all, what am I to do? I've got to live."

"Yes, dear, you've got to live, but so have they. Isn't there a proverb which says, 'Self-preservation is the first law of nature'?"

"Why, what of that?" she asked.

"Well, don't you think there's something in it?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't you think that the Northtowers girls, and, still more, the Northtowers mothers, would like to—to have your blood?"

"But I've never done anything to them," she persisted.

"No—not directly to them—and yet, in a way, you have. You've taken their legitimate portion, you've made your own of just seven times as many young men as are your rightful share, and they

naturally think that they have every right to feel that you ought to be satisfied with Georgey."

"Ah—they don't know Georgey."

"Is he still—difficult?"

"Difficult! Oh, my dear, he's impossible; I'm sure he's mad."

"Why, what has happened to him?"

"Oh, nothing has happened. He's mooned about with his head in the clouds these last few days; comes in punctually to meals and is elaborately and painfully polite to me; asks me every day if there are any engagements, and generally makes me wish I'd never set eyes on him. Oh, my dear Kit, if I ever did anything wrong when I was young I've been thoroughly paid out."

"Poor dear, it is hard on you."

"Hard," she said with a sudden accession of power in her voice which raised it almost to a scream, "all I can say is, whenever I think of my people, I feel that hanging is too good for them."

"Yes, but is that all Georgey has done?"

"Isn't it enough? Never the smallest personal interest in myself, never a kind word, never a kind look, only that painful, icy enduring politeness. Why, if I didn't have a little fun outside, I should go stark staring mad."

"But—but Georgey *was* fond of you."

"Was he? Yes, so they seemed to think."

"But he made love to you."

"Not for a long time," she said in quite prosaic tones, "never since he came to this place."

"Oh!—"

"I don't know what has happened to him lately," she said, "but he's very much worse than he used to be; worse in this way, he seems like a man who has found out something. Now what can he have found out?"

"Oh, my dear child, how should I know?"

"I thought perhaps he might have told you."

"Told me? Why should he tell me anything?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," she replied, "the last time I saw you, which was on the night we were dining with Lady Hermione, you and he were talking very earnestly."

"Earnestly?"

"Well, as if you were quarrelling, really, and I wondered whether—well—"

Then she broke off short and sat looking at me, the very picture of embarrassment.

"Well, speak out," I said.

"You won't be offended?"

"Oh, no."

"Because I don't want to offend you, Kit. You are the only spot in all this great horrid town—"

What do you mean by calling me a spot?"

"Oh, I mean you are the only person who seems to have compassion on me."

Poor girl, she was right; I *had* compassion on her.

"I wouldn't quarrel with you for the whole world. You are the Colonel's daughter, you've been the first lady in the regiment for years although you're so young, and I thought the other night—well, I may as well say it, it seemed as if Georgey was pressing you very hard about something, and you seemed to fairly round on him."

"He was boring me," I said rather pointedly.

"Oh, was that all?" She was evidently quite disappointed. "I thought it was something quite different—"

Again she broke off short and looked at me with embarrassed eyes.

"I'll tell you one thing, Emmeline," I said quietly, "you are very much in love with Georgey."

"I? In love with Georgey? Oh, put that out of your mind. I might have been—if he'd been good to me, I—I should have been. But any little budding feeling I had he nipped quite early in our life together. I shall never be any more to Georgey than I am now—at least," she added, correcting herself, "Georgey will never be any more to me."

CHAPTER XX

A WORD OF WARNING

"Men may be very clever, very scientific, very superior. But woman's wit has passed into a proverb."

ALL the same, in spite of the fair Emmeline's protestations, I still held to the opinion that she was in love with Georgey, and that wounded pride was at the bottom of all her little, harmless flirtations. After all, was it not natural that she should feel the hurt both to her pride and to her heart? Really Georgey seemed to have the faculty for inflicting that kind of wound upon the women whom he honoured with his affections.

I was thoroughly sorry for myself, sorry to have been mixed up with him, even in what was only an intention, and I was infinitely full of pity for the unfortunate girl who had trusted her life to his ungallant and unfeeling keeping.

I did not see Georgey himself for a few days. Then one afternoon, when he must have known perfectly well that Dick was kept in barracks by some special duty, he came boldly in his high dog-cart to Aldham. I was busy with some letters, and did not look up as I heard the sound of wheels, so had no

idea that he was at hand until he was shown into the room.

"I knew Markham was safe this afternoon," he said; "I have left him with his nose to the grind-stone; you'll not see him much before dinner-time."

"What made you come?" I asked.

"I wanted to see you; I've been hungering to see you for days."

"That's nonsense, Georgey," I said; "you must drop all that; I'm not prepared to receive you on those terms."

"It doesn't matter whether you are prepared or not, I have come," he said quietly. He was so quiet that I felt a little afraid of him. "If I see you from time to time," he went on, speaking in the same intense and suppressed accents, "I may get through. Ha, ha," with a laugh, "I may even get over my fancy for you. It doesn't seem likely, but it's within the bounds of possibility. You know the old saying, 'Too much familiarity breeds contempt,' and if I see much of you I may even come to feel contempt for you in course of time."

"I think," I said, looking straight at him, "that if ever you come to have that feeling, Georgey, it will be from infection. Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Perhaps I have," he said. "Men have gone mad for less than I've endured. But I'm not mad yet,

of that you may rest assured. But, do you know, that woman is driving me out of my mind."

"Something has, I think, already done so. It is very hard on your wife. After all, Georgey, you made her your wife."

"We won't go into that again," he said coolly. "I haven't driven five miles out to discuss Emmeline. I want to talk about myself and about you."

"You're most flattering, but I'm going out."

"No," he said, "you're not going out at present; you're going to stay here and give me some tea, and we're going to sit by the fire and have a cosy chat."

Honestly I was frightened. "But I have a most important engagement."

"No afternoon engagement is so important that it cannot be broken," he said in the same suppressed tone.

"Very well," I returned with a sigh of acquiescence. But, all the same, I did not intend to remain Master Georgey's prisoner, be he mad or sane. I got up and rang the bell.

"Why are you ringing the bell?" he asked.

"My dear Georgey," I replied, "I can surely ring the bell in my own house."

He looked a little ashamed of himself, and when the footman answered the summons I told him to mend the fire. When he had completed that office, I told him in a very casual tone to bring the tea as soon as possible. He replied that he would do so,

and went out of the room, leaving us alone together again. I sat back in my corner of the settee waiting for Georgey to speak.

"I—I—aren't you going to talk to me?" he stammered at last.

"Well, Georgey, I have an engagement somewhere else. It doesn't interest me to talk about Emmeline, or the state of your affections, still less to discuss the exact workings of my inner consciousness. If you have anything to say I am here and ready to listen to you, since you force me to do so."

Now it is very difficult to continue a conversation under such circumstances as these, and Georgey hummed and hawed and fidgeted in his corner of the settee, not daring so much as to put out a finger to touch the hem of my garments. I did not help him out even by an observation on the state of the weather, and while he was still hack-hammering to begin the "cosy talk," the servants arrived to bring in the tea. While the two men were in the room, I took the opportunity to say in a very casual tone, "Oh, I have something I want to show you," and I quietly went out.

Once in the hall I flew as for dear life up to my bedroom. There I wrote a letter to Georgey.

"I can only believe that you are mad," I said. "Please go away at once. If you do not I shall communicate with my husband on the telephone,

which is in the adjoining room. For your own sake, I beg you not to make any scene. There are a dozen men about the place who would as soon put you in the horse trough as look at you.—Yours,

“ KIT MARKHAM.”

I sent my maid downstairs with the note, and bade her give it to the butler to give to Mr Vancourt, and also to beg him to have tea before he left, as I was unavoidably obliged to go out. Then I ordered the carriage, which I knew was on the point of coming round, to wait for me in the stables, dressed hurriedly, went down the back stairs and out through the servants' quarters, and got into the brougham in the yard. So before Georgey received the note I was speeding away down the avenue.

Whether my note showed him that I was as determined as he could possible be or not, I do not know, but I heard nothing more of the incident. My maid told me that Mr Vancourt had taken tea, and that he had left a message for me, “ His compliments, and it would be quite all right.” So I breathed once again, but I took the precaution of giving the strictest orders to the men-servants, that under no consideration was I ever again at home to Mr Vancourt, unless it was the occasion of a party. I fancied the excellent Griffiths looked a little down his nose as he received the order, but in truth I was in too desperate a state to stand upon any ceremony at that

moment. That I should allow myself to get upon such terms with Georgey that whenever he knew Dick to be safely kept away for an hour or two he could come flying out to Aldham was a state of affairs not to be permitted for one moment. I absolutely gave up walking about by myself. That is to say, if I was with Dick or any friend I was glad to seize the opportunity of getting a little exercise, but when I was alone I kept strictly to my carriage.

And after this we had leave again because my father was married in London, married at the same hideous church at which our knot had been tied. I should never have thought that I should stand by and see my father married to a stranger and yet feel so little emotion. Of course I had known Lady Henry Scrope for some time. She was a handsome and charming woman, exquisitely dressed, and was evidently very keenly alive to my father's perfections. I knew that he would make her a delightful husband, and I felt that she would make him a charming wife. And so it was without any feeling of disloyalty to my own mother that I assisted at the ceremony and kissed them both at its close.

We had the shortest of short leaves for the occasion, and we went back to Aldham the next day. By this time the winter was over, and indeed a great part of the spring. London was crowded, and gayer than I ever remember to have seen it. So great were its

attractions that Mrs Georgey Vancourt went home for an indefinite stay.

"I'm going home for a few weeks," she announced to me a few days after our return. "Oh, yes, my people are quite scandalised. When we were up for the Colonel's wedding I broke it to them that I intended to spend the rest of the season in town. They asked me politely whether my husband had been so fortunate as to obtain leave. I explained that he had not done so, but that I was not in any way bound by the movements of my husband. They demurred at my going home, but I suggested that it would be more in accordance with the conventionalities in which they were so hide-bound if I stayed there instead of going to a hotel."

"You didn't, Emmeline?"

"Yes, I did, and I hope to get a little bit of my own back during the next few weeks," she said, for once without any vestige of the usual broad smile on her face. "My father and my brothers sacrificed me, ruined my life, tied me up, because they wanted to get rid of me, to a man they could have had no respect for. They couldn't know anything about Georgey, he hadn't a penny, he was a detrimental to the last point, but they were so keen to get rid of me that they did not think three thousand a year too big a price to pay for carting me off. So I'm going home for the rest of the season, and I'm going to consider them only as I consider Georgey—and

that's second to myself," patting herself significantly. "For my own sake, I'm never, never, never going off the straight, but I'm going to sail as near the wind as will amuse me. I shall have my At Home day, and I shall give a few little lunches and a few little dinners, perhaps at the Hans Crescent Hotel, or some such convenient spot, and I shall get some new clothes, and I shall have a good time. I don't see why the whole three thousand should go into Georgey's channels of amusement."

What could I say? Nothing. I could only make a sort of gesture, which implied pity, regret, and a certain measure of disgust.

"Perhaps you will give an eye to my gallant spouse when I am away," she said in a curiously hard and defiant way.

I felt myself stiffen visibly. "I'm awfully sorry, Emmeline, but I can't undertake any duty of that kind. I—I don't think you are wise to go away unless you can take Georgey with you. I quite understand your feeling; I know I should feel like that myself, but, all the same, I don't think it's quite wise, and you mustn't look to me, my dear girl, to help you out in that respect. I've got my own boat to keep upright. My husband wants every shred of my interest, every hour of my time. He wouldn't approve of your going away and leaving Georgey to shift for himself, and get into any mischief he likes; and if anything goes wrong, he and the other

men will only blame you. You mustn't ask me to mix myself up with Georgey in any way."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, then repented her, and shut her lips tight, at the same time stretching out a nervous, trembling hand towards me.

"You poor little thing, I'm sorry for you," she said. "I'm sorry for you in a double sense."

"Oh, don't trouble about me, there's nothing about me that you need be sorry for."

"Isn't there? I think there is. You've been one of the lucky ones, Kit. You might have been in a holy mess, but you got yourself out of it, or Fate got you out of it—I don't know which."

"The Fates have been very good to me," I said quietly.

"Yes, they have. I wish they had been half as gracious when they pointed in my direction. But they weren't, they weren't, and surely I'm not wrong to make the best of the circumstances in which I find myself. I'm fond of you, little Kit; I suppose everybody is that comes within your zone. You're the kind of girl that makes the best of people, draws the best out of people, sees the best in people, and I'd like to give you just one word of warning."

CHAPTER XXI

A SUGGESTION

"The more ill-regulated the class of mind, the more often is it that gratitude is found there."

I MUST confess that my heart went down to my boots when Emmeline Vancourt said in that significant tone, "I'd like to give you just one word of warning." And yet my instinct made me, as it were, rise up in arms at the very suggestion.

"Warning?" I said in my chilliest voice. "I don't understand in the least what you mean."

"No, I don't suppose you do. Up to the time of my marriage you had only seen the best of Georgey. He had always been on his p's and q's before you, who were the Colonel's daughter, as well as being the girl he was fond of."

"I can't allow you to say this to me."

But Emmeline put up a hand which impelled me to listen.

"Listen to me, Kit," she said. "You've been nicer to me than anybody in all this dreary town since I came here. I've carried on with all sorts of boys; I've had 'a good time.' Ugh, a good time, save the mark! I've flirted, made an exhibition of myself, made people talk about me, laughed, joked,

and, as the common people say, ‘carried on anyhow.’ Well, out of it all, what have I got? Do you think I’ve enjoyed it? Do you think I wouldn’t have enjoyed it better if I had been with my husband as you are with yours? I haven’t been. We started apart from each other, we shall be apart to the end of the chapter; I expect nothing else, and look for nothing else. But I want to save you.”

“To save me?”

“Yes, it sounds odd, doesn’t it? I, the pariah, the outcast—”

“Oh, Emmeline!”

“Yes, the daughter of Heth, the Ishmaelite, can help one of the elect, and she will. You’ve been good to me, little Kit; you don’t see the breakers ahead, because in your scheme of life you don’t realise, you don’t understand, the evil you have to reckon with. You think that Georgey, my precious husband, is never going to let on to the world what happened between you and him before we were married. That’s where you make a mistake. He has said little or nothing up to now, because he fancied that it paid him better to hold his tongue. A man of honour would let his tongue shrivel between his teeth before he would give away a girl who trusted him. There’s no honour in Georgey Vancourt; you can’t trust him as far as you can see him—I know.”

“But what has this to do with me, Emmeline?”

“Do you think Georgey hasn’t told me everything?

Do you think Georgey hasn't gone into every detail—how you loved him, how you promised to run away with him? Oh, yes, every word. Do you think he hasn't shown me your letters?"

"My letters! Has he kept them?"

"Every scrap—every scrap that you ever wrote him. I tried to steal them for you. He was taunting me about you not many days ago, and it suddenly came into my mind that he had told me that he had letters of yours, and that he might use them. I decided I would steal them for you, and so render him powerless in that respect."

"And why didn't you?"

"Because I have a tell-tale face; I was born with it, I can't help it. Georgey saw what was in my mind, and laughed in my face and said, 'No, no, you don't, my fine young woman, they're going into safe keeping—have never a fear of that.' He went out of the house ten minutes after, carrying that precious casket under his arm."

"Well, why do you tell this to me?"

"Because I want to warn you. It's quite true that if Georgey uses those letters he will have to send in his papers at once and leave the service. That's the only thing that is holding him back, that and the feeling that he may get round you by other means. But over your devoted head he will hold those letters for all they are worth; I know him inside out."

"You mean that he will suggest showing them to Dick?"

"Certainly."

For a moment I did not speak. In truth, I was wondering what would happen if Georgey should put those letters into Dick's hands. I felt somehow that Dick would refuse to read them, and yet—supposing he did? Would he understand? Would he sympathise? Would he have pity? Oh!—it was a dreadful question.

"There are two ways open to you," she went on in her eager yet practical voice—she was very practical, this London-bred girl, "either you must tell your husband—if you have not already told him—"

"Told him what? That Georgey has letters of mine?"

"No, although you'll be wise if you tell him that. No, I mean about the circumstances of your engagement to him, or else—you must get the letters."

"How can I?"

"There are more ways, my dear, of killing a dog than by hanging him," was her shrewd reply.

"I don't understand you, Emmeline." I could not help heaving a little sigh. Her ideas were so different to mine, and yet, as a matter of actual fact, she had come out on the top by comparison with me. It was a humiliating position and I felt it deeply.

"The safe plan would be to get the letters," she said, following her own train of thought.

"But how?"

"Well, I must leave that to your own ingenuity; I give you the clue, I can do no more. Georgey has got them in his own quarters. I never go there, he knows that, and I am going away, so I shall have no excuse for going there. But there is no reason why you should not."

"I? Go into your husband's quarters! You must be mad."

"No, I am not mad, or, if I am, there is method in my madness. Don't you know Mrs Danks?"

"Yes."

"Well, she lives in the same block as Georgey's quarters. You pitch on a time when Georgey has a field day or an inspection—some time when he cannot possibly be there, and when his man will not be there either, take the opportunity to call on Mrs Danks, and on your way in or out slip into Georgey's room and make the letters your own. It's quite simple, it would be done in a moment."

"But I should be seen—everybody would know."

"But why? Georgey cannot accuse you of stealing his letters, or, rather, of stealing your own letters. Besides, you would destroy them, you would swear that they had never been in existence."

"But the casket?"

"Oh," she said, reddening a little, "I can put you up to a trick in getting into that."

"Emmeline!"

"Well, when one is dealing with Georgey Vancourt one has to fight him with his own weapons. I have a key that fits the casket ; you can open it, take out the letters, and Georgey may be days before he finds out that they are gone."

"I—I couldn't do such a thing."

"Oh, yes, you can, my dear girl ; a desperate woman can do anything."

"Have you read those letters ?"

"Every word of them, my dear child."

She looked a little uneasy, but she was evidently acting on the "in for a penny, in for a pound" principle.

"Now," she went on, tossing her head with an air as one who should say, "There, I've made a clean breast of it, do your worst," "now, if your husband read them you would find it very difficult to persuade him that you like him the better of the two. Oh, why are women such fools ?" she went on. "If I hadn't been such a fool as to write letters to Georgey I should not have been caught in this trap. It was my own silly tell-tale letter, that I was fool enough to leave on the hall table—reproaching him for not writing to me—that put them on the track, and set them searching in my bureau. And the irony of it all was that I didn't care tuppence whether Georgey wrote to me or whether he didn't, not tuppence—not a half-farthing. I liked to keep a smart young man dangling on the end of a string. Ah, it's I that

am on a string for the rest of my life. However, miserable as I am, and cruelly as my own hopes have fallen to the ground, I can still save you, little Kit, and I will."

"That's awfully good of you. It's no use pretending to you, Emmeline, that I shouldn't like to get those letters back. They are a great weight on my mind ; I really am uneasy about them, although I really do not think Georgey would be so villainous, so black-hearted, as to use them against me."

"Have you told your Dick anything about it ?"

"No. I *was* going to—I began to—but I—I shirked it, I won't pretend anything else. I daren't go and steal them."

"Oh, yes, you dare. Go and call on Mrs Danks. See, I'll give you the key ; don't lose it whatever you do, it might give you away if you left it behind. I don't say that Georgey would know it, but he might. I suppose you wouldn't have time to slip all the precious letters out of their envelopes and put blank sheets of paper in ? If you could, it might be weeks before he found it out, or even months for that matter. Now listen to me. I'm going to town in three days' time. Next Monday the General comes down to inspect the regiment. They'll be out in the Abbey fields from—oh, you know all their movements on inspection day better than I do. Why don't you confide in Mrs Danks if you are in a funk ? A woman will always help another out of a scrape."

"Mrs Danks? Oh, no."

"Oh, Mrs Danks is a decent woman. True, she married her husband when he was a non-commissioned officer and lived in sergeants' quarters, and she hasn't yet got over the feeling that she must of necessity be in a blue funk whenever an officer's wife calls upon her. She's known you since you were a little girl, hasn't she?"

"Of course she has."

"Then don't you think you are wiser to make a friend of a woman like that than to go on suffering this torture? Why, you needn't even go near Georgey's quarters. Go and wait in Mrs Danks' smart little sitting-room while she purloins the precious casket for you, and you can turn it over at your leisure."

"But—Georgey's servant?"

"Oh, he'll be enjoying the delights of a General's inspection; you needn't bother about him. Besides, if you get the letters, what does it matter whether Georgey knows or whether he doesn't."

"Emmeline," I said, "I must think it over; I can't answer offhand. It's not a small thing to do. Yes, I know, it's awfully kind of you; you've thought of it all for my benefit. And—I might tell Dick. He might be a bit angry, but he would get over it in time; and if I stole those letters—"

"They're your own—they're your own."

"And yet—it doesn't seem decent, does it, to be

stealing even what is one's own—breaking open a man's private receptacle? I'm sure Dick would be very angry."

" My dear girl, it makes no odds to me which you do. I've given you the tip, I've thought it all out, and if there were the slightest chance of my getting unobserved into Georgey's quarters I'd steal them for you myself, and be proud to do it. But there isn't the remotest chance of it. I'll leave you to think it over by yourself, weigh it carefully, for and against. There's an easy way out, and you'll be a little donkey if you don't take it."

She rose up and shook herself out, arranged her smart frock and glanced at herself with eyes of unmitigated admiration ; then, taking hold of me, she kissed me effusively.

" You were a good friend to me when I first came down into this howling wilderness—and what a fool I was! Never can I think without laughing of your father's disgusted face when you first called upon me. Oh, how he pitied Georgey! I'll leave you, my dear ; think it over."

CHAPTER XXII

PRIVATE MULLINS

"Theft of one's own is no theft, and yet it may be made to feel so."

I DID think it over. For days, sleeping and waking, the thought of that casket was ever with me. If I had been Emmeline Vancourt I should not have hesitated at all, but should have made no bones about quietly going and purloining what was my own. I knew that her advice was good in a sense, and yet I did not see how I was to carry out her scheme—not without taking Mrs Danks into my confidence; and I must own that the very thought of taking Mrs Danks into my confidence was absolutely obnoxious to me. I had never been upon terms of equality with her. Her husband had only just been promoted, and she was accustomed to regard me from the standpoint of a non-commissioned officer's wife. Now that I was a married woman, married to such a man as Dick, to ask her to get me back my letters to a man so much his junior—oh, it was impossible; I couldn't bring myself to do it. I should have to own that I was in Georgey's power, for one thing. Oh, no, it

was impossible, and not to be thought of for an instant. And yet—I wanted those letters, I felt that it was right that I should have them ; they were mine. I might make a call upon Mrs Danks the excuse for going into that part of the barracks, but even that would be stretching a point, and further than that I felt I could not go. If only I'd had courage to tell Dick ! I could have done it before our marriage, ay, and after our marriage ; but to tell him now that I had put off the evil day for so long—oh, I was beginning to realise what an utter fool I had made of myself in the past. It was not that I was afraid of him—oh, no—but of the effect such an explanation would have upon him. I did not want Dick to think badly of me, and I was beginning to feel differently towards Dick to what I had ever done before. And I wasn't very strong just then, and I felt that if there was a scene about it—any sort of a scene—it would kill me.

At last the fatal day arrived. I knew from Dick that there would be a General's Inspection that morning, just as Emmeline had told me, and as soon as I had seen him drive away towards the town I went upstairs and dressed myself. Now, the morning hours were not the time for calling on Mrs Danks, yet what other excuse had I for being in barracks ? None. True, one of the children in whom I was interested was ill with some childish disorder, and I could very well pay her a visit which would account

for my being in barracks at all. Then a somewhat happy thought struck me. I had forgotten that Dick had a room in the officers' quarters which he used for changing from uniform to plain clothes, for he had all the real soldier's horror of being seen in his paint. I would slip into Georgey's room, take the casket, go into Dick's room and there extract the letters, and I would then secrete them in my pocket and slip the casket back into its original place.

Upon this I acted. I knew that Dick's man was due for field day just the same as his master, and I guessed that Georgey's man would be. So, as bold as brass, I drove into barracks, sent my horse to the stables, paid my little visit to the child and then quietly walked round to my husband's quarters. It happened that I had to pass the door of Georgey's room in order to gain my husband's, and as quick as thought, with a guilty glance round, I slipped into the room and looked about for the casket. I found it just where Emmeline had told me it would be, on the shelf underneath the dressing-table. It was a small affair made of ivory and some kind of quills, a little toy more fit for the dressing-table of a woman than of a man. Having once gained possession of it, I scuttled out of the room and along the corridor to my husband's quarters, and then I sat down comfortably to extract the letters and slip some folded sheets of plain notepaper which I had brought with me in their place. I had known exactly how to fold

them, for I was very fixed in my habits, and always wrote in exactly the same way. I had just pushed all my own letters into my pocket, and was completing their replacement by blank sheets, when, to my horror and dismay, I heard a quick familiar foot-step coming along the echoing corridor, and the next moment Dick came into the room.

"Good heavens!" he said, "what are you doing here?"

I had just had time to slip the box down on the floor and cover it with the skirt of my dress.

"Oh, is that you, Dick?" I said in as casual a tone as I could summon up. "I wish you'd get me a little scent or something. I've been to see Mrs Danks' little girl, she's awfully ill, you know, and I feel quite overdone."

"Dear, dear, dear," he said, and strode to the dressing-table and fetched a great bottle of scent which stood there, "shall I put some on your forehead? Do you think you're going to faint?"

"No—no, I don't think so, but couldn't you get me something to drink that will take away this deadly feeling?"

He bustled out of the room and I seized the opportunity, not being in the least faint, to wrap the little box in a long gauze scarf which I had used for putting round my throat while driving. Then Dick came bustling back again, full of concern, bringing something in a glass. I choked down a very

nauseous draught, thanked him prettily, and told him I should like to have the cart round.

"Oh, you put up the cart, did you," he said, "or are you in the carriage?"

"I'm in the cart. I was some time with the child, and seeing Mrs Danks, and so on, and I thought it a pity to keep the pony standing about this hot morning. Can you go home with me, Dick?"

"Not very well," he said, "but, darling, do you think it's safe to go back by yourself?"

"Oh, yes, oh, yes, I'm all right now."

I felt myself an overwhelming hypocrite as I drove away leaving Dick in all the splendour of full dress on the steps of the officers' quarters. I kept my eyes about me so that if I did see Georgey Vancourt I should have some sort of excuse for being in barracks, but never a glimpse of him did I catch. I got home in due course, confronted by the stern fact that I had purloined a private casket out of the quarters of one of my husband's brother officers, and that I must get rid of it by hook or by crook. The letters I had a perfect right to take if I chose, but the casket—that was another question. How to get it back into Georgey's quarters was beyond my ken altogether. I took every letter out and burned it promptly, lighting a fire in my dressing-room for the purpose. Then I rang for one of the servants to come and clear away the débris. I carefully folded the casket in brown paper and tied it with ordinary

string—if I tell the truth, a piece of string off an old parcel, and sealed it with red sealing wax. Then a happy thought occurred to me that I would send it by parcel post addressed to Georgey's man-servant. No sooner said than done. I took it into the town half an hour later and posted it, not at the general office where I was well known, but at an out-of-the-way shop that had a branch office, leaving the carriage at the end of the street, and walking into the shop with the parcel under my arm as if I had come on foot. The only attempt at concealing myself that I made was to buy a large white chiffon veil, in which I wrapped my face over my white veil, and thus effectually disguised myself. The box was addressed to Private Mullins, B. Troop, The White Horse, Cavalry Barracks, Northtowers. I paid the three-pence which it cost and walked quickly away, not having been asked any questions. Of course I did not address the parcel in my own handwriting but carefully printed the characters thereof. Within I wrote, in a similar caligraphy : "You are advised to put this box back in your master's quarters without making any comment."

Having regained the carriage, I took off my disengaging veil, and going into the more frequented parts of the town did some shopping in quite an ordinary way. Then I had nothing to do but await the development of events, and, as might have been expected, events developed themselves with extraordinary rapidity.

"Awful row up at barracks to-day," said Dick, just as I was finishing my soup.

"Oh, didn't the inspection go off all right? Was the General disagreeable?"

"No, no, nothing to do with that; that young ass Vancourt's in trouble with his servant."

"Oh?"

"It seems there's been a theft out of Vancourt's quarters to-day."

"A theft!" I felt obliged to carry the conversation on somehow or other.

"Yes, a theft of sorts," said Dick with supreme contempt. "As far as I can make out, Vancourt has missed a box with particularly precious contents—'papers,' he called them. People seem to think they are the love letters of the other girl."

"Oh, Dick, what interest could the man have?"

"Well, that was what the man himself said. Anyway, he's under arrest in the cells at this moment."

I felt full of compunction; but surely when the parcel arrived at the cavalry barracks the evidence would be sufficient to clear Private Mullins at all events. I felt that Dick was looking for me to make some comment.

"Has the other girl bribed Georgey's man to crib the letters for her?" I asked.

"Nobody knows; but that's Georgey's idea. Georgey declares that the box was there this morning

when he dressed for the inspection ; his man-servant seems to think he has the same impression, but won't swear to it. The theft was discovered before his man had any chance of being out of barracks, but, all the same, he's under arrest. Of course Georgey himself doesn't say they are the girl's love letters, but simply says, 'papers that were of extreme value to him.' Personally, I must say," Dick went on, "I do hate anything of the kind happening, it gives one such an uncomfortable feeling all round."

"Oh, most uncomfortable for everybody concerned. Well, I daresay the box will turn up, or they will get some clue or other."

"I am sure they will," said Dick. "That young ass Georgey was persuaded by the Colonel not to send for the police, but to keep the matter in barracks as long as possible, and he himself went into the cells and recommended Georgey's man to make a clean breast of it if he knew anything about it. They say the poor chap declared with tears in his eyes that he was as innocent of it as a babe unborn. Pity he used that simile ! "

"Why, Dick ? "

"Oh, 'Innocent as a babe unborn,' and 'Strike me dead if I tell a lie' always go against a man however innocent he is."

As Dick had no more to tell me, and as I was not keen on pressing the subject, I heard no more about the theft then. I determined that I would send

Private Mullins a sovereign as soon as I knew he was free of his durance vile, and I felt sure that his release was only a matter of a post or so. Sure enough the next day Dick told me that Private Mullins had been set at liberty, and that Georgey had given him a sovereign by way of a salve for his misfortune.

"I suppose he left the Court, so to speak, without a stain on his character?"

"Oh, yes."

"But you didn't tell me why he was let off," I said in a most interested manner. *That* was not put on; I *was* interested.

"The box turned up by post, empty of the precious 'private papers.' Your father pressed Vancourt very hard to know what the papers were, and elicited, without his actually putting it into plain English, that they were the letters from the other girl. Your father told him that as he couldn't use them against the lady and remain in the regiment it was just as well they had found their way back to their rightful owner. Vancourt looked very blue and distinctly sulky, and informed the Colonel that he would give his man-servant a tip, and that, in short, he was sorry that he had made any fuss about it. 'I should think so,' said the Colonel shortly."

How I blessed the fashion of short honeymoons, and the fact that my father had chosen to marry his wife in the very middle of the drill season, when a

long leave for a commanding officer was practically impossible !

" I never," Dick wound up, " saw your father so thoroughly shirty before. He hemmed and hawed, and muttered and frowned, said it was a disgraceful affair, that he greatly disliked his officers being mixed up in anything of the kind ; that officers ought to be very careful before they brought accusations against privates, particularly their servants, and that if Private Mullins were any good he'd ask him to find another bat man."

*
CHAPTER XXIII

A GAME OF BLUFF

"If you want to succeed at the game you must bluff it out to the end."

I DULY sent off the sovereign to Private Mullins, and then I rested on my oars, feeling that if I were going to float down the stream of iniquity I must wait to see which way the tide would choose to take me. Of one thing I was certain, that the letters were dead and buried ; all trace of them was gone. I did not think that Georgey even suspected me, and I breathed freely once more, and told myself that surely the apex of my career of deceit had been touched, that after this I could safely descend into the everyday life of common honesty. And oh, what a comfort it was to feel that one could be honest, or very nearly honest—honest, that is to say, on every point but the one !

But I flattered myself. It happened one afternoon that I was at a garden-party at the Deanery, and I found myself for a moment alone, my husband being at the far end of the beautiful garden. But a moment

before I had been gaily talking to Mrs Dallas, a dear little woman, the wife of one of the clergy attached to the Cathedral, and I was just thinking that I would go and join Dick when Georgey Vancourt came quietly up and sat down on the bench whereon I was resting.

"I have been waiting for this opportunity for ten days past."

"Oh, have you really," I said.

"Yes," he replied, "I have been wanting to see you very much."

"Really!"

"You are cleverer than I thought you were, Kit," he said, looking at me with cool and insolent eyes. "I admit that you've checkmated me for the time. What have you done with those letters?"

"I don't understand you," I said, feeling that I was acting extremely well.

"You heard about the robbery in my quarters?"

"Dick did tell me something about it. You blamed your servant for stealing some of your papers. But why should you connect that with me?"

"Because the private papers, whose description I did not care to disclose, consisted of your letters to me."

"You ought not to have kept them, and it serves you right if you have lost them."

"But you took them; and what puzzles me is how you knew they were there."

"My dear Georgey, you flatter me," I said, with a chilled smile. "The last time I saw you you were good enough to threaten me with exposing me to my husband. Now you want to connect me with an ordinary theft."

"Oh, no, a theft very much out of the ordinary, but a theft all the same."

"My dear Georgey," I said, "I am really very sorry to say anything to contradict you, but if everybody had their own those letters belonged to the writer, and not to the receiver. You had no more right to keep them than you had to pick my pocket."

"They were a comfort to me," he said tragically.

"Oh, no, Georgey, that won't do," I said. "We have known each other, we have liked each other—"

"Liked!"

"Well, you can call it by what name you like, but don't spoil it now by making believe too much. At all events, you can't expect me to condole with you for having lost something which, to put it mildly, you had no right to possess."

"I can't think how you found out they were there," he said.

"Oh, why do you harp on that string? As if it's likely that I found out anything about it, as if it's at all likely I know anything about it. You'll find your head turned one of these days if you are not very careful."

"They were a comfort to me."

"Then you must find another comfort now they're gone. At all events, it's no use trying to fasten their loss on me. Besides, you couldn't if you wanted to."

"Think not? Ah, that's where you make a mistake. I know practically every move you made that day, what you wore when you returned the box to my servant."

I got up with a curious sort of feeling that this man was talking nonsense, utter nonsense, that he was really not responsible for his actions or for the words he uttered.

"Really, Georgey," I said, "you bore me. Do you know, lately I've been so glad I didn't marry you, that something came to prevent your marrying me. It's hard on the girl you did marry, but oh, what a miss on my side."

And then I started to sail off across the lawn, keeping my laced flounced parasol well between his face and mine. He did not speak until we had almost reached the group of which my husband made one. Then he bent forward a little, and let fly one shot under the lace flouncing of my parasol that made my heart stand still.

"I shouldn't wonder, Mrs Richard Markham," he said, in a quiet, concentrated sort of way, "if you didn't sing another tune one of these days. You ought to know the service well enough to be perfectly aware that a theft in barracks, particularly in officers'

quarters, is not a thing that can be condoned or treated with any degree of lightness. The matter has gone out of my hands altogether, the honour of the regiment has been impugned. It is true, the character of the papers is only known to one person besides myself."

"And that person?" I asked, standing still.

"Is the detective who has charge of the case; he knows everything. But it is not a matter that can be kept between the detective and myself beyond a certain time, sooner or later everything must be made known to the Colonel commanding the regiment. That's all I have to say about it."

"It isn't quite all I have to say about it, Georgey," I said quietly. "If the time comes when I have to speak it will not only be the Colonel of the regiment who will hear all I have to say, it will not only be my father and my husband, it will be a certain gentleman who is called the Commander-in-Chief, who will be accurately informed of every detail and circumstance in which your past and mine have been connected. I may come out of it badly, inasmuch as, in a sense, I may be presumed to have deceived my husband, though he would never admit that for a moment; but to you this moment of explanation will be a moment of utter ruin. The moment you speak I shall tell the rest, and that," I said, "is my last word."

With that I deliberately dismissed him, bowing

and putting my parasol right down between us, and he had no choice but to take off his hat and leave me. To tell the truth, I did not know that I believed all that he had told me. I was somewhat annoyed, very much bored, but frightened not at all. I believed that his threats were entirely bluff; in any case, the Colonel who commanded the regiment was my own father, and I knew that I could depend upon him to embarrass me as little as possible over the business if it should come to his ears.

Now it happened that my father and his bride were in the same group as Dick. There was a vacant seat by my stepmother, and I sat down on it with somewhat of a sigh of relief.

"You are tired, Kit," she said kindly.

"Yes, Mrs Owen, I am rather tired to-day," I said quietly, "but it's nothing. The weather is too hot for ordinary purposes; don't you find it so?"

"Well, I don't know, my dear, it's not as hot as London, after all, and this life is such a rest after the awful grind of gadding about. Looking back, I can't think what I did it for."

"Looking back," I said, "one can hardly think what one did anything for."

"Surely, Kit," she said, looking at me in a fixed sort of way, "surely, Kit, dear, you are rather young to have found that out."

"Yes, I suppose I am—I suppose I am, but I have found it out all the same, Mrs Owen."

"I wish you wouldn't call me Mrs Owen, it sounds horrible from you."

"And yet what can I tell you? I couldn't call you 'Mother.' "

"Oh, no, dear."

"I used to always call you 'Lady Henry'; it *has* a more affectionate sound, I feel it myself."

"I should much prefer you to call me Constance," she said. "I am not so very much older than you are; your father is so ridiculously young to have a grown-up daughter."

"Yes, we always thought so too," I said. "I will call you Constance with pleasure. Thank you very much for permitting it."

"My dear child, something is wrong with you."

"Oh, nothing that you need worry about."

"But what is it?" she persisted. "I can see there is something. Surely you and the big husband haven't—"

"Oh, dear, no," I said, laughing outright, "there's nothing the matter with Dick, if that's what you mean. I am only a little worried, that's all, it really isn't anything much."

If I had been anywhere else that afternoon I think I should have told her everything. As it was—I couldn't; not in that gay party, with all the people chattering and chirping around me. I saw that she looked at me quite anxiously several times, and when at last we bade each other 'good-bye,' she whispered

to me, " You will come to me if there is anything I can do, any way in which I can serve you ? Your father has made me very happy—I thought I should never be happy again. If I can do anything for you it will be a labour of love."

" You're very dear and sweet," I said, " and I'm glad Daddy married you. He's been lonely for such a long time, ever since my own mother died, and now, of course, that I'm married, he must have been lonelier than ever. Yes, I'm awfully glad that you married Daddy."

In spite of my bold words to Georgey Vancourt, I did feel rather uneasy about what he had told me, and I asked Dick that night, in as casual a way as I could, whether anything had been heard of Georgey Vancourt's lost papers.

" No, no, they've been burned long since ; they were the letters from the other girl—plucky of her, I call it. The young idiot was very much inclined to follow it out to the bitter end, but I don't think he got much encouragement from your father."

" No, I don't suppose he did. But if he does carry it out, what can he do ? "

" I don't know, I'm sure, precious young fool—give the girl away, you know."

" Yes, but what good will that do him ? "

" None at all. Why ? Did he say anything about it ? "

" Not much. Dick, he bores me."

"I wonder you stand any truck with him, I really do," said Dick, with his own air of good-natured contempt. "He began on me the other day, put a supposititious case to me. I shut him up straight."

"Oh, what sort of a case?"

"Oh, supposing I wasn't I, and you were married to someone else, what would I do if my wife had been carrying on with another man and kept it dark. I said, 'You precious young ass, she's got a bad enough bargain in you without your going around howling and asking people what they would do in different circumstances to what they've got.' Then Vancourt shut up—well, he had to, because I walked away and left him."

"Is it true that the whole affair is out of his hands now?"

"No, not a bit. What do you mean?"

"I mean—I thought I knew the army inside out—he was talking rubbish this afternoon, and he happened to say that he had nothing more to do with it, that it's all in Daddy's hands."

"Oh, that's all bunkum, that's all tall talk. I once, not very long ago, heard him taking Jarvis to pieces—Phil Jarvis, if you please—for his coach driving. The precious young fool was explaining what he would do. Gad! I put him up straight that very afternoon."

"To drive the coach?"

"I did, and, Gad! that took the stuffing out of him."

"Oh, I didn't know that Georgey had ever driven the coach."

"It was the only time, his only chance, and his reign was a brief and inglorious one. At the very first corner I had to take the reins and get him out of a mess that to him was inextricable. But nobody can take the reins and get him out of a mess with his wife. He doesn't seem to realise that."

CHAPTER XXIV

I DRAW THE LINE

"The encroacher creeps in little by little until he is in a position to take the whole."

THE more I thought over the general position of affairs the more convinced I was that my wisest course would be to take time by the forelock. I felt that if any information were sprung upon my father he would not be able to act with as much wisdom as if he were forewarned. For forewarned is forearmed, and to be well up in a subject is, of course, to give you double capacity for dealing with it.

So I determined that I would be in time to fore-stall Georgey Vancourt, and that I would tell my father everything that had happened. But if man proposes, well, God often disposes, and before I got hold of my father I had another interview with Georgey himself.

He came boldly up to the house and asked to see me. He was denied, as I had given orders some time previously he should be.

He said very quietly, "I have not come on a mere visit, I have business of extreme importance with Mrs Markham. I know that she is at home,

and I must insist upon seeing her. Take in my name, I am sure she will see me."

"Certainly. Show Mr Vancourt in, Griffiths," I said, speaking as quietly as I could, although I was absolutely possessed with fury and annoyance, "and let the carriage wait, I shall not be many minutes."

He retired, and returned immediately, showing in Georgey Vancourt. I waited till the door was closed before I addressed him.

"I don't know," I said, "how you dare force yourself upon me in this way. I didn't choose to make a scene before the servant, but clearly understand, this is the last time you insist upon seeing me. I object to receiving you, and I don't wish to make it a matter for my husband to decide ; I object to it on my own account, without any reference to him. If you come here again I shall appeal to him and to my father to protect me from you."

"It was necessary that I should see you. I've a great deal to say to you, and I cannot say it in any other house as well as in your own. I—I want to tell you that I know everything."

"Oh, what do you mean, my good man, what *do* you mean ?" I said petulantly ; "you make me tired, as the Americans say. What is it you want ?"

"What I want is yourself. I consider I have been done out—"

"And I consider that you are absolutely crazy," I cried. "Will you not realise, or must I state it for

the fiftieth time, that *you* did yourself out of all chance of marrying me, you yourself put a barrier between us that no human power can break. It's no use talking about what might have been, we have only to do with what is; we have only to do with hard facts that no amount of wishing or vexation can alter. You are another woman's husband, I am another man's wife. You seem to have repented of your bargain, I am absolutely satisfied with mine."

"You mean to tell me," he said roughly, "that you care anything about Markham?"

I was still standing in front of him. "Listen to me," I said. "Surely you know whether I am lying or stating the truth. I not only am satisfied with my bargain, but, looking back, I cannot understand how it came about that, while I enjoyed even the acquaintance of Richard Markham, I should have been attracted, even for a moment, by you."

"You're not in love with Markham?"

"Why, what do you think? Isn't he well calculated to win a woman's love?"

"Thirty thousand a year," he muttered bitterly.

"No, nothing to do with his thirty thousand a year. Why, my dear Georgey, if you had thirty thousand a year you'd be dear at the price. I should have married you because I was in that frame of mind, and if there had been no obstacles put in the way of such an arrangement. But by this time I should have repented."

"Oh, no."

"I say yes. I tell you when I look back I think what a fool, what a double-distilled idiot I was to have passed him by for you. Think, man, in what have you the advantage of him?"

"I'm nearer your own age."

"You talk of Dick as if he were old! He's a man in the prime of life; it's pitiful even to compare you—it amounts to sacrilege. Now look at me well, I'm not trying to bluff you, I'm not lying simply because I'm nervous lest you bring some scandal on me. You choose to believe that I took my letters—"

"You have not denied it," he said.

"I neither admit nor deny it. If you continue this persecution of me, of the wife of your superior officer, you will finish your career in the army in a most inglorious manner. Georgey," I went on, "how can you do it? It isn't manly, it isn't the *rôle* of a gentleman. You know there is not a man in the regiment, or, for the matter of that, in the service, who wouldn't cut you dead and send you to Coventry for hounding me down as you are doing now."

"You might have left me my letters," he said.

"I acknowledge nothing about those letters. You tell me they are gone, and I, for one, am glad and thankful of it. I don't think anybody would blame me even if I had deliberately stolen what was my own. I would rather nobody knew I had ever been so intensely stupid as to have written them, but since

they are gone it isn't worth troubling about them any more."

"They were a comfort to me," he persisted.

"I can't help that, you should have kept them more safely. You told me they were in your quarters—"

"No, I never told you."

"No? Perhaps not, but Dick did."

My rejoinder was as quick as his disclaimer, for I was not minded that he should catch me out in that way.

"Anyway," I continued, "clearly understand me, Georgey, I not only do not love you any more, but I do not like you—I even dislike you, though I doubt if I should trouble to do that if you would let me alone."

"And you want me to believe that you are in love, *in love*," he repeated, "with Markham?"

"I don't in the least care, Georgey, whether you believe it or not, the fact remains the same. And I don't know if I am what you would call in love—if I was in love with you."

"And you like Markham better than me?"

"Better than you? Oh, how funny! I will tell you how I feel towards him. In the first place, I think he's the best man I ever knew, and the kindest and the handsomest and the most amusing. I can't bear him to go away in the morning, and I count the hours till he comes back again. I love everything that he does and looks, he satisfies me. I admire

him and trust him, and every time I remember that I am his wife I thank God for His unspeakable goodness to me. Now, have I made my position clear, or are you still anxious to go on persecuting a woman who regards you as dirt beneath her husband's feet?"

"I don't believe you," he said doggedly.

"You don't? Then you're hopeless. I tell you that it is true, every word of it. And now I am due elsewhere, so I must ask you to go."

I rang the bell at once, leaving him no choice.

"The door for Mr Vancourt, Griffiths," I said when Griffiths put his solemn face in at the door. "Good-bye, Mr Vancourt," I continued, "I'll tell Dick all you say."

He turned upon me a look which was positively murderous, but did not, in the presence of the servant, venture on any further discussion. I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw him mount into the dog-cart and turn the horse's head in the direction of the gates.

Oh, these terrible interviews tired me so! They made me feel that really life was becoming impossible, and I determined to see if I could not put a stop to them there and then.

I happened to meet Mrs Owen as I drove down the High Street, so I stopped the carriage and got out to speak to her.

"Is Daddy in barracks, or where?" I asked.

"In barracks. He won't be free till six or seven o'clock."

"Do you know if there is anything on?"

"Oh, only ordinary business, I think. He told me not to count on him till six or seven o'clock."

"Oh, thank you."

"Come and have tea with me at the little shop," she said.

"No, thank you, not to-day, dear. I have to go up to barracks, and I wanted so see Daddy for two or three minutes if I possibly could."

I reached the barracks in a few moments, for the horses were both fresh and free, and being so well known, I stopped at the gates and inquired for my father.

"Do you know where the Colonel is, and what he is doing?"

The sentry answered me promptly that the Colonel was in the office.

"Is Captain Markham in barracks?"

"I think, my lady," he replied, "that Captain Markham have just gone across to the 'orspital."

"Oh, yes, one of his grooms is ill, isn't he?"

"I believe he was took bad the other day, my lady," was the reply.

"Thank you very much. I'll drive down to the office and see if I can find my father," I said to the coachman, "and then you can go over to the hospital and tell Captain Markham I will come back for him presently."

The man touched his hat and started the horses

off in the direction of the office. On the way there I changed my mind.

"No, I don't think I'll send across to the hospital, Jackson," I said, "I shall find Captain Markham quite easily later on. I may want you here."

I told the footman to inquire if the Colonel was in the office, and if he could speak to me. My father came out looking very gallant and smart in his undress uniform.

"Hullo, Kit, what good fortune brought you here?"

"Well, Daddy, I don't know that it's good fortune. I wanted to consult you about something."

"Well, come into my private room, and then we shall be quite alone; or would you rather go down to my quarters?"

"I'd rather go down to your private quarters."

So he got in and we drove down to the small house beside the big block of officers' quarters where my father's rooms were.

"I hope there's nothing amiss, Kit?" he said rather anxiously as we drove along.

"Well, I wanted to consult you about something. It's not exactly amiss, perhaps, but I thought I would like to consult you."

"Oh, I see. And what is this business of yours, Kit?"

"Wait till we get into your quarters and I'll tell you all about it."

He pulled down the corners of his mouth and tugged fiercely at his moustache.

"Don't you think," he said, after a pause, "that if there's anything to consult about, it is Dick's right to hear it?"

"No, I don't think so, not in this instance. After all, you were my father before Dick was my husband. I think you are the right person for me to talk to; yes, Daddy, dear, I really do."

I must say he looked thoroughly frightened.

"Have you seen Markham's new horse?" he said, with an absurd attempt to carry off the situation with an air of supreme indifference.

"Oh, yes, I was with Dick when he bought him. He's a beauty, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's a great beauty, but then Markham gave a long price for him. 'Pon my soul," my father went on, "I don't know that there's anything in which price tells so much as in horse flesh."

"Or husbands and wives," I said flippantly.

"Eh, what? Who's been buying husbands and wives? Eh — what? Don't mean me, I hope?"

"Oh, no, daddy, dear, certainly not. I think you've got a tremendous bargain in Lady Henry."

"Eh? You really think so? She's a good woman, she's a handsome woman, she's a dear, sweet kind woman, by Jove! yes, and I'm perfectly certain of one thing, that if your sweet mother had

lived nobody would have admitted Constance's virtues more quickly than she would."

"Oh, yes, mother was eminently reasonable," I said quickly.

Then we drew up at the door of my father's quarters, and he helped me out of the carriage?

"Kit," he said, as he shut the door of his sitting-room behind us, "don't tell me that you and Markham have got across."

CHAPTER XXV

JUST THE DIFFICULTY

"There are some difficulties that are so trivial that it seems folly to put them into words. And yet it often takes a very shrewd head to grapple with them."

"YOU haven't got across with Markham?"

"No, Daddy, nothing of that kind, and it's because I don't want to get across with Dick that I've come to consult you. I have got a most humiliating confession to make to you, but I will make a clean breast of it, and you must help me out to the best of your ability."

I sat down, and, well—I gasped.

"Here," said my father, dashing a little brandy and soda into a tumbler, "drink this before you begin, and then tell me all about it."

I got down the nauseous potion, and then my father drew me down on to his make-believe sofa.

"Now, little woman, tell me all about it."

"Well, Daddy, you know there was a time when I didn't want to marry Dick."

"Oh, but that's all right, isn't it? I thought you were so fond of Markham."

"I am, Daddy, I am, that's just the difficulty."

"But why should there be any difficulty about it?"

"There shouldn't be any difficulty, Daddy, there oughtn't to be, but there is."

"But why?"

"Daddy, dear, it's no use my saying, 'Don't be angry with me,' it doesn't matter tuppence whether you are angry or not ; it's no use my saying anything to excuse myself, or to blame you—or do anything but just tell you the story as it happened. Did it ever strike you that there was a reason why I didn't want to marry Dick?"

"No, I can't say it did."

"Ah, if you had been my mother instead of my father you would have known."

"It was not any fault of mine that your mother was taken away."

"No, but she was, and I had to get on as best I could without her. Well, I didn't want to marry Dick because—I was in love with someone else."

"The devil you were!"

"It wasn't the devil then, it didn't matter ; but it's the very devil now."

"And who was he, pray?"

"Now that's just what I don't want Dick or anybody else but yourself to know."

"Someone beneath you?" asked my father, with the darkest of dark frowns.

" Well, not as the world goes, but as my own heart tells me now, and as my own shame tells me now, beneath me in every other way. Did it ever strike you, when you've all been talking about Georgey Vancourt and the girl at the end, who that girl was? Did it ever strike you to ask what I was doing at Idleminster the day that I became engaged to Dick? You all seem to have taken my presence at Idleminster for granted. I had no business to be in Idleminster."

" But you went with Dick."

" No, I did not ; I went to be married to Georgey Vancourt—and Georgey sold me. Yes, I know what you are going to say, that you will go out and kick him. That's what Dick would say, and that's just why I don't want him to know anything about it."

" My God ! Dick mustn't know anything about it."

" No, dear, that's why I've come to you. Well, you know the whole circumstances of how Georgey was married. Georgey was engaged to me. We had decided that we couldn't live without each other, and that we would run away and be married, and trust to your not breaking our hearts afterwards. You were pressing me to marry a man I had never thought of marrying, and didn't want to marry ; Georgey was pressing me to run away with him and trust to luck, and—I was a fool. Oh, I know, you

can call me every name that occurs to you—you can't call me more names than I have called myself, and have been calling myself for months past, that would be impossible."

"And now?"

"And now I want to forget that I ever had such a silly notion in my head as marrying Georgey Vancourt, or anybody but Dick. And Georgey is making himself extremely unpleasant to me."

"The young hound!"

"I don't want to get upset," I said, "because Dick is in barracks, and someone is sure to tell him I'm here, and the carriage is at the stables; he's sure to know, and he's equally sure to come and look for me—really, Daddy, I could knock my head against the wall for my own stupidity and folly—to think that I could ever seriously have looked at a mere boy like Georgey Vancourt."

"But you're married to Markham; it's all over and done with."

"No, it's not all over and done with. Georgey's keeping it very much alive."

Then, for I had no time to spare, I told my father everything. And oh, how angry he was!

"Kit, you have been an awful fool, there's no gainsaying that; but, at the same time, there's no getting out of the fact that Vancourt has behaved like a consummate cad, both to yourself and his wife. But trouble yourself no more about it, you will hear

no more on the subject from him. I shall speak to Vancourt at once, and—well, I shall give him a piece of my mind. He's had one or two pieces of my mind already on other subjects, but this will be the strongest he has ever had to swallow."

" You don't think that I need tell Dick about it?"

" Well—I don't know—you know Dick better than I do. Has it never occurred to him to ask you what you were doing at Idleminster that day?"

" No, it has not. I've tried to tell him, but it has never come off."

" In any case it's better he shouldn't know, at least until after I have spoken to Vancourt."

Then he put out a kindly arm and drew me nearer to him.

" You seemed so happy with Markham," he said.

" Oh, Daddy, dear—don't you see? I adore Dick, there was never anybody quite like Dick in the world; that's what makes me so mad. I'm so sorry for that poor girl that Georgey married that I—I really don't know how to express myself, Daddy, I really don't; but every time I realise that I am Dick's wife, and that I might have been in Emmeline Vancourt's place, I thank God for it."

" Oh, well, that's all right then. But, at the same time, Vancourt married an appalling woman, she's an awful woman; I put a good deal of the trouble down at her door."

"Oh, no, Daddy. She's not a woman of class, but that's not everything."

"No, perhaps it isn't, but it goes a long way towards it, all the same."

I stood up to go. "I must be going now, Daddy," I said.

"All right, but, by the bye, what shall we say to Markham? Does he know you were coming to see me to-day?"

"Not a word. I do not have to account to Dick for every minute of my time."

"No, I know, my dear, but it's just as well we should have the same story to tell, isn't it?"

"Daddy, dear, there's no story in the matter. You are my father, and I have been to see you, that's enough for anybody—anyhow, it's enough for Dick. You'll do your best for me?"

My father came yet a little nearer to me. "Kit," he said, in a queer hoarse voice, "I believe I practically forced you into marrying Markham."

"No, not quite that. You helped it on; you wished it very much."

"Kit," he said, "you've not regretted it, you would not go back and undo it? I don't mean that you'd marry a little fool—a little sweep like Vancourt, I wouldn't insult you that far, but you wouldn't go back and marry anybody else?"

"Than Dick? Oh, no, I'm awfully fond of Dick, I wouldn't exchange him for anybody. But, Daddy,

there's something I have been wanting to ask you for ever such a long time."

"What, something else?" His tone was sharp, his apprehension unmistakable.

"No, dear, not about me this time, but about yourself."

"About myself—eh, what?"

"That difficulty there was with the boy—is it all right now, has everything blown over?"

"Well, as to that," said my father, "difficulties of that kind don't exactly blow over, you know."

"But what happened?"

"Well, the wife helped me out—oh, I shall pay her back, of course. I'm not the kind of man who goes a-borrowing off a woman—particularly his wife—but she put down the money, and I shall pay her back as time goes on."

"I don't think you need have asked her to do it," I said half hesitatingly; "Dick is very rich."

"Yes, I had an idea at one time—in fact I did half broach the subject to Dick—but somebody came in—you know how one gets interrupted at times—and then somehow, I can't tell you how, I talked to her, in a way she led up to it, and before I knew where I was I had told her the whole story."

"Not about me?" I felt myself redden. "I—I shouldn't like even your wife, nice as she is and sweet as she's been to me, to know that I was ever so

silly—that I didn't want to marry Dick—that I fancied I wanted to marry Georgey Vancourt."

"Oh, have no fear on that score ; I never let on that your marriage to Dick was anything but the purest love affair. Besides, I couldn't tell her anything about Georgey Vancourt ; I've only just learned it myself. And, by the bye, Kit, dear little girl, who've stood by me all these years, don't you think we'd better forget that such an idea even entered your mind ? What's the good of thinking about it ? We all have temporary cranks in our heads at some time or other, and surely that was an innocent one enough."

"Oh, what a comfortable daddy you are," I exclaimed ; "I don't wonder Lady Henry fell in love with you ; I should have fallen in love with you myself if you hadn't been my father."

"Oh, come, you do very well as you are."

"And you think, Daddy, that the boy will be all right?"

"Oh, yes. He was a young ass—all men are asses at some time or other, and most women. It's better to get it over young, like the dogs get distemper—to treat it as a mild disease. Derry's a good sort ; he was perfectly frank and open about the whole thing, he never tried to pretend he hadn't been an ass ; if he had—I should have been angry, I couldn't have helped myself. Of course it's a nuisance that he should have thrown his money away, because there'll be less for him later on."

"Don't, Daddy ; we don't want to hear anything about that 'later on,' either Derry or I."

"Well, I'm not particularly keen on it myself," said Daddy, with a good-natured laugh. "As things have turned out, I'm not the derelict I once thought I was going to be. I've found this world an extremely pleasant place, take it as a whole ; so will you too, old lady, when you've got over the worry of that young rascalion."

He opened the door for me then, and I passed out into the entrance. Just as I reached the steps Dick came leisurely along.

"I heard you were in barracks, young woman," he said.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN ARMISTICE

"Isn't it wonderful what one can buy with a little experience? But experience costs a price, often a big one."

A FEW nights later than this Dick and I were dining with my father and his wife, and my father seized the opportunity of telling me, in half a dozen words, that he didn't think Georgey Vancourt would bother me any more.

"Oh, have you spoken to him?" I said.

"Yes, I—in fact I told him what I thought about him, and gave him the alternative of leaving you alone or sending in his papers at once."

"So bad as that?"

"My dear child," said my father in his most official tones, "you can't have that sort of thing going on in the service; it would be most improper."

Then Dick came back across the room and asked me the name of a song that we had heard some little time back with which he had been particularly struck, so I went over to the piano with him and began talking to my stepmother. I had therefore no further

opportunity of hearing any more of my father's interview with Georgey Vancourt. Not that I wanted to hear anything more about it; I was heartily sick of the subject, and I should have been thankful to have heard of his exchange to a regiment on foreign service.

Shortly after this Emmeline returned to her husband. The day after she reached North towers she came out to see me.

"Well," she said, looking me critically over, "you don't look up to much, my dear. Now, has that little man of mine been behaving himself?"

"He had to."

"Oh, has it got to that? Have you told the hubby about it?"

"No, Emmeline, but I have told my father."

"O—h! You got back your letters, didn't you? I guessed you had, because Georgey was kind enough to accuse me of stealing them. As I explained to him, what there could be in his love letters from another woman to interest me is a little difficult to see. But you know the ineffable conceit of these men. They think their wives are bound to be keen and eager on every step they take. I chuckled, my dear, because I knew you had the sense to take my advice. It isn't every woman that would have given it."

"I know it, Emmeline; you've been a good friend to me, I shall never forget it."

"There," she said, patting my hand in a motherly

kind of way, "don't you worry about that. You're a lucky girl, you've got a husband a girl can be proud of, you've got everything your heart can want—and think—you might have had Georgey!"

I couldn't help laughing, but her words jarred upon me terribly.

"Oh, Emmeline," I said, "don't you really care for Georgey?"

"Not a bit, my dear, not a scrap. I thought he was a nice little chap to have a lark with, but I was never in love with him."

"I thought I was."

"Oh, yes, you're a little slim thing, not a great grenadier like me. Do you know what I was thinking all the time I was being married, in my towering wreath and my enveloping veil, that made me look a foot longer than I really was? All the time I was wondering what we looked like."

"Oh, Emmeline!"

"Yes, I did. And as we were coming out of church, what do you think I heard a man say?"

"Nay, how should I know?"

"'Yes,' he said, 'ripping fine bride, but, for my part, I should have liked a little more bridegroom.' Imagine what I felt like!"

"But Georgey isn't little."

"No, he isn't, and it isn't Georgey's fault that I'm too big. Naturally I look upon him with different eyes to what you do; I have to look down, you have

to look up—a fatal thing, my dear, for a wife to have to look down upon her husband. Of course we are the superior sex, nobody but a fool would ever admit otherwise. All the same, since the mental superiority is so great, let the ladies always look up and the gentlemen always look down."

"Well, Emmeline," I said, "that's as may be, but I know this, that I'm able to look up to my husband in both senses, and it's a very comfortable feeling."

"I am sure it is," she said heartily, "and, my dear, you may take my word for it that if you had been beguiled into marrying Georgey you certainly wouldn't have looked up to him in any mental or moral sense—um, I know I oughtn't to say it, we never ought to do a great many of the things we do, we poor, weak human beings, but that's neither here nor there. I couldn't be a hypocrite and a humbug, and when I meet these dear, sweet, good domestic, fifteenth-century women that seem to grow hereabouts, who say they can't accept an engagement to dinner without consulting 'dear Jack,' I feel—what do I feel, Kit?—well, what a blessing it is that they can feel like that; I couldn't, and wouldn't if I could. I feel somehow as if their leases are worded differently to mine, and oh, what a difference it makes—the difference of the wording of your lease; some have a 'fair-wear-and-tear' clause, and some haven't."

I didn't quite see what she meant, but it sounded to me as if it might be rather clever, so I held my tongue and said nothing. Then she changed the subject, and asked me abruptly if I was going to a certain festivity that was going to take place at the Palace of the Bishop.

"Oh, I don't think so ; I may go in for half an hour or so, but I rather doubt it. You are going, of course."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss a chance of shocking his Episcopal Highness for anything, to say nothing of Mrs Episcopal Highness and the Misses Episcopal Highness. Of course I know that if they could possibly have got out of asking me to their splendid function they would cheerfully have done so. That's the beauty of being with a regiment, they can't take you or leave you by yourself, it's take or leave the whole lot, unless you've done something very disreputable, which I haven't the slightest intention of obliging Georgey or anybody else by doing. My dear," she went on, "when I think how Georgey would bless me if I would only enable him to get a divorce—well, it makes me quite sorry for him."

"Emmeline!"

"There, now, I've shocked you. Dear, dear, dear, what a thing it is to be brought up prim in a regiment instead of scraping up in a more or less rapid city set as I did. However, Georgey doesn't quite want to get rid of me, particularly as getting rid of me wouldn't find him any better off with you. Poor

old Georgey, I'm ever so sorry for him, and yet he has his consolations."

"Oh, yes, Georgey has plenty of consolations. Besides that, he may be fond of you yet."

"God forbid!" she cried. "No, no, my dear, it's best to be quite honest about these things. I might have cared for Georgey if he had been even tolerably decent to me; but he wasn't tolerably decent to me. He is like many another man who has married because he couldn't get out of it, and he had an idea that he might console himself with a mere matter of £ s. d., and, as with many another man, the consolation proved ineffective. And now I must be going, I don't want him to know that I came out here to-day; I don't want him to know that I have seen you. I sha'n't talk to you when we meet for a long time, and if I should ask you to lunch, or anything else, I shall be none too gushing to you. For the moment I honestly believe that he is not sure in his own mind whether I took those letters or you did."

"But I don't like you to be blamed."

"Tut, my dear, tut. That's what they say in story books, it matches with 'Pshaw.' Did you ever know anyone in real life who said 'Pshaw,' or 'Tut'? Well, you do now, and that is this person. I happened the other day to be at old Lady Straversclyde's; such a dowdy! She had on a gown that might have been designed in the Ark, and made on the

top of Mount Ararat without a sewing machine or a hot iron. She told me, among other precious items of information, that diamonds were vulgar in the day-time, and that no lady of refinement would permit even her husband to see her in curl papers. I assured her that I curled my hair with the tongs, so that not even Georgey had that pleasure, so far as I was concerned. Then she gave me a withering look—all over me, as if we were talking of curling my arms and legs—and said, ‘I presume that is why your hair has that peculiarly rough and untidy appearance.’ ‘My dear Lady Straversclyde,’ I said, ‘I comb it up the wrong way to give it that look ; you can’t get it in any other way.’ I think she was genuinely shocked. She said it was a reprehensible habit, and a bad example to the servants, so I promptly said, ‘Pshaw, I don’t agree with you.’”

“ You said ‘ Pshaw ’ to Lady Straversclyde ? ”

“ I did, and I said it with all the virulence that I could possibly put into it. She looked at me quite steadily, yet with a certain dignity tempered with a far-away kind of disgust. ‘ My dear,’ she said, ‘ you are a very young woman, and I am an old lady ; in matters of dress and the toilette I have far more experience than you have. I don’t know,’ she went on, ‘ who Shaw may be, presumably your maid, or some dressmaker.’ I could scarcely explain for laughing that ‘ Pshaw ’ was an exclamation of much the same date as ‘ Pish.’ She said she had never

heard such an exclamation as ‘Pish,’ but she thought it sounded rude ; that she understood that people in London were very rapid nowadays, and that if I would take her advice I would try and get off all those doubtful modern slang terms. I tried hard to explain that ‘Pshaw’ and ‘Pish’ were neither of them in any sense modern expressions, but she said at last, with a pathetic air, that either I was mixed or she was, and that it would be very agreeable to her if we were to change the conversation. I think Lady Straversclyde means to give me up,” said Emmeline with her vast smile. “Do you think that I shall manage to survive it ?”

“Oh, Emmeline,” I said, “how can you be so silly when there are so many serious—”

“Oh, my dear, don’t preach ; do anything you like, slap me if you think it will make you a bit happier, but don’t preach. I was preached at morning, noon and night, right down to the fatal day when I married Georgey. They tried it this time, but I got even with them.”

“How did you do it ?”

“Well, whenever father or one of the boys took to preaching I got up and stamped.”

“No !”

“I did. And when they stopped to hear what I was going to say I fixed them with a glittering eye and said ‘Dam.’ ”

“You didn’t.”

"I did, and, my dear, if I had known the effect one little 'dam' would have had before I was married —oh, I should have ruled the roost. That's the worst of learning by experience, you generally get your experience too late. Anyhow, it gave me a quiet season, for after that I had very little trouble. And, oh, what a good time I had! I lived my own life, went my own way, took my own engagements, troubled about nobody or anything, I never had such a ripping time. They say, you know, it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, and there's a lot in that. Certainly it's better to find out how to manage your men-folk too late than it is to go to your grave in blissful ignorance."

"Emmeline, you are incorrigible!"

"Am I? Well, that's a happy thing for me," she said. And then she put her arms right round me and kissed me vehemently as she went away.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNLOOKED-FOR CHANGE

"One never knows what the next turn in the wheel may bring. That is why some people always put D.V. when they are in any way pledging the future."

IF this were a concocted story instead of a real one, it would now come gracefully to an end, and I should be left to the imagination of the reader reposing on a sort of nebulous cloud of perfect happiness, not to mention prosperity. But, alack and alas, my father did not prove himself a true prophet, and I did not go from my interview with him straight into a desirable haven of peace, not a bit of it. The regiment happened to be very hard worked just then, and I was not very strong, and was therefore not about as much as usual, so for some little time I did not meet the redoubtable Georgey. But Emmeline came to see me fairly often, generally choosing the morning for her visits, and being a downright young person who never minced her words, she told me, one fine day when she had driven over to see me, that she was afraid something was going to happen.

"How happen? What sort of something? I don't understand you."

"Well, to put it in brutal English," she replied, "I think my little Georgey is going out of his mind."

"Emmeline!"

"That's what you generally say when I give you a little tit-bit of information," said Emmeline with a vast smile that showed me that she was only speaking in metaphor. "I asked him this morning if he thought the kidneys were quite done enough, and what do you think he said?"

"Oh, how should I know?" I cried impatiently.

"Well, of course, not being there you couldn't know exactly, but it was so funny that I simply must tell you. He looked up and said, 'Kidneys? What's the good of talking to me about kidneys? Hearts are the only things that trouble me.' I told him I was sorry for him; that mine, of course, did not worry me, but that I realised that a really out-of-the-way heart must be a most onerous possession."

"You didn't!"

"I did," she cried, "of course I did. You don't suppose that after Georgey has sold me, married me with his whole soul, as he puts it, bound up irrevocably with that of another woman—yourself, my poor dear—that I'm going to come the tender, trusting, broken-hearted little wife? Not much! I told him I didn't like hearts to eat, as I thought they were horrid and leathery. Oh, he was so angry! He raved about my insensate nature, how I had come between him and paradise. I frankly admitted it,

but I told him I was a most unlucky stop-gap who had been far more let in than he had, since he had gone into matrimony with his eyes open, whereas I had not. Then he began about you. Oh, my dear, if you had only been there to hear him."

"Thank goodness I wasn't. I don't want to hear anything about Georgey, I don't want to know anything about him—no, no, I don't mean that I don't want you to tell me, it's awfully kind and good of you, I shall never be able to repay you, you know that as well as I do, Emmeline. But it annoys and worries me, all this make-believe about love, it isn't real."

"No, I don't think that it's real, I really think that Georgey's a little cracked. But I came this morning to tell you that Georgey blames me entirely for the loss of the letters, and says that he will be even with me over that business yet. I told him that he could blame me if he liked ; that I was quite indifferent to the whole affair ; that if he had letters of yours cooked up he ought to be ashamed to own it, and that he couldn't possibly go outside the house and give himself away to the world as being cad enough to hold a woman's letters over her head in order to terrorise her. And then, I must confess, he let fly a bit of a thunderbolt."

"Why, how ? What did he say ?"

"He said, 'You thought, my fine London madam,' yes, he used those very words, 'that when you had

set the Colonel on me you had settled me for good and all ; don't you make any mistake about it. You've managed to put your long gawky self between my sweetheart and me.' I said I thought three thousand a year had something to do with it, but Georgey was proof against even that kind of sneer. ' It had everything to do with it,' he said in the most callous tones imaginable, ' and, by Jove ! you're dear at the price.' I don't know," Emmeline went on, " that I don't agree with him in the main, for any man or woman you don't want is dear at any price, and I told him so."

"Emmeline," I said, " what when it is a man or woman you don't want and price doesn't enter into the question ? That is my position with your husband. I don't want him at any price ; in fact, I'd give a price to get rid of him. But what was the thunderbolt ?"

"Well, he looked at me darkly, got up from the table, brushed the crumbs from among the frogs on his coat, and he said, ' Don't for a moment flatter yourself that you've got to the end of the story yet. I lost her by my own folly, but losses may be made good.' ' My dear Georgey,' I said, ' you can't shut your eyes to one fact, which is that Mrs Markham does not regard you as a loss, she doesn't want you, she doesn't care for you, she's over head and ears in love with that splendid fellow she married. You are only a nuisance and an annoyance to her, and a reminder to her that she was once a young girl, and

that, having been a young girl, she was once an utter fool.' 'Ah,' he said, 'she has plenty of grit. When I left her for you I wounded her to the very depths of her soul. I didn't realise then what she was, nor how she would take it. My little Kit,' yes, that was what he called you, 'has the courage of a lion and the endurance of an Arab. She loves me,' he went on, standing with his hand on the back of a chair, and, I must admit, looking as handsome as paint, 'as I love her, for all time: she is the other half of myself.' 'Georgey,' I said, 'you are quite mad, she doesn't love you, she hates the very sight of you. She's as wrapped up in Markham as he is in her, and you'll find yourself in the wrong box if you try the "other half" dodge, as much as you would if you tried it on with me.' He positively shuddered. 'I think,' he said in vinegarish tones, 'that you grow more intolerably vulgar every day that you live.' 'Perhaps I do,' I said, 'but if so I have you to thank for bringing out all the evil traits in my character. Anyway, you will find that what I say is absolutely true. You had better give up this girl and regard her as some dear dead thing gone into the irrecoverable. You had her, she was practically yours, and you let her slip because you did not possess those powers of courage and endurance which you attribute to her. Nothing can put back the time, Georgey, nothing can bring back the past, the one thing is as unchangeable as the other.' 'That's where,' he said,

'you entirely make a mistake, I shall never give up my quest. I may ruin my career, such as it is ; I may ruin my reputation, such as it is, but the day will come when Markham's wife will once more belong to me. I have said it, I swear it. The Chief is not all powerful, and the superior attractions of thirty thousand a year will not prevail against my love.' With that," Emmeline continued, "he went out, shutting the door with a crash behind him, and leaving me speechless at the table. I *was* dumb with astonishment. I don't know what there is about you, little Kit, to inspire such a torrent of adoration as this, but when I sat there and heard Georgey—the simple, the frivolous, the good-looking, harmless, brainless boy that my people had successfully nobbled for me, give utterance to sentiments which would have done credit to a mediæval knight, I must confess I was staggered. Then when I thought it out I came to the conclusion that trouble had been too much for Georgey ; he's a little bit off. So I'll tell you what I would do, little Kit. Keep yourself well in view of other people these next few months. Something will turn up, something will happen ; nobody ever goes on in that state of excitement without a turn upwards or downwards. In the meantime, keep yourself well within reach of other people.' "

"Why?"

"Well, you never can tell what a man in that

curious state of mind will do—might kidnap you or something of that kind. Anyway, I will smooth him down all I can, for I don't want a scandal. Believe me, if Georgey would only be reasonable I'd ask for no better existence on earth than to be just where I am."

"But, Emmeline, surely you feel things?"

"Yes—though I think my senses are blunted. When you have three men systematically nagging at you for years ; when everything you do and say and look and think is wrong ; when your sins of omission and commission are without end ; when you offend by the very fact that you exist—well, it doesn't tend to engender the finest of fine feelings in the ordinary nature. I did think," she went on, looking away out of the window across the green waving fields to the blue edge of the horizon, "I did think when I was married that I was going to have an existence of peace, or at least of toleration. I made a mistake, but I'm not going to break my heart about it ; I've been too used to the rack ingeniously and well turned to mind Georgey's feeble efforts at screwing me up. Now I am going. I've put you on your guard, and I'll keep you well informed of any new developments that may arise. What I do say as a last word is, be surprised at nothing, be prepared for everything."

I went out to see her get into the little cart in which she had driven herself out to see me. She

was without a groom, for, as she explained to me, she very seldom took a groom out in the morning, because then nobody could give information as to where she had been.

"Oh, Emmeline, you've got a new pony!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, isn't he a beauty? I bought him all on my own, drove out to a dealer, took my own vet. with me—did the whole thing by myself. Even Georgey was obliged to admit that I had lighted on a bargain. Sixty pounds, my dear, and I believe I could get a hundred for him any day."

The pony really was handsome, a good deal fretted by the flies, but distinctly a pony of parts, cobby in build, eager and free.

"Steps up to his nose," said Emmeline, as she got into the cart. "I've never been so pleased with myself in my life. Well, good-bye, my dear, good luck be with you. Thanks, let him go."

This last to the groom who was standing at the pony's head. She turned and waved her hand to me and I saw her no more. I felt weak, feeble and sick against this splendid personality, which had something of the virility of the coster girl about it. Her radiant great eyes, her vast smile, the dazzling whiteness of her teeth and the entire callousness of her nature all impressed me with a sense of my own feebleness.

I went out to the front of the house and sat in a

big basket-chair thinking over what she had told me, wondering what the end would be, and almost determined to make an effort and tell Dick everything. After all, where was the sense of having such a husband and saying nothing. And yet—and yet—my whole soul shrank from putting myself before him in a bad light. Suppose he should turn from me when he found that I had once longed to be Georgey Vancourt's wife? Suppose—oh, suppose a hundred and fifty things, for it seemed as if crowds of terrifying thoughts came flitting through my brain that bright September morning. I knew that she was right, that her advice was good; I knew that I must keep very close to my house, that I must not go out on foot alone, that I must shelter myself within reach of my Dick's strong arm. It was bitter, humiliating, but what could I do? Simply nothing. I sat there for a long time, until, indeed, they came and told me that my lunch was served. I ate next to nothing, and just as I was taking my coffee, to my surprise, Dick came driving past the windows in his dog-cart.

"Why, I didn't expect to see you yet," I cried.

"No. I had the opportunity of coming out a little earlier. Something has happened."

He came round to my end of the table and took hold of my hand.

"Is it Daddy? What is it?"

"No," he said. "I came out so that you might

not hear the news unexpectedly from anyone else."

"Yes?"

I could scarcely breathe, and my heart was beating to suffocation. I looked up at him—at least, I looked up in the direction his voice came from ; I could not see him.

"You've had Mrs Vancourt out here this morning?"

"Yes. You don't mind?"

"If I did," he said, "I should not mind now."

"Why, what has happened? What is it?"

"My dear child," he said, "I think it's kinder to tell you right away, without breaking it. We don't know exactly what happened, but Mrs Vancourt is dead!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OTHER GIRL

"One of the most embarrassing moments in life is when someone tells you a story about yourself, not knowing that it is you."

I SAT and looked at Dick, it seemed as if it were minutes ; I was conscious that the clock was ticking loudly, then something began to pump in my ears, and Dick's concerned face blotted out, and I blotted out too, for I knew no more until I came to myself with my maid undoing my dress and Dick dabbing some eau de Cologne on my temples.

"I think you told her too suddenly, sir," I heard her say.

"I don't see how I could have told her in any other way. Of course it's an awful shock ; it's knocked everybody over."

"She's coming round," said Louise, warningly. "A little more of this, Ma'm ; you'll soon be all right. There's nothing to be afraid of, it's very weak, just a little, Ma'm."

She spoke with an air of authority such as she had never used to me before, and Dick raised my head

and Louise held a glass to my lips. I tried to sit up, but they begged me to keep still, and continued dabbing my temples with the refreshing water.

"Is it true," I asked, "or were you springing some joke on me?"

"No, unfortunately it is absolutely true," said Dick. "I'm awfully sorry to have knocked you over like this, dearest, but you would have had to know it."

"Oh yes, it was very stupid of me, very stupid. I think I'm all right now, Louise. I would like to sit up—I'm chilly, let me sit in that big chair by the fire."

Dick helped me over to the big chair that I had pointed out, and then Louise left us.

"Tell me about it," I said. "Is she really dead?"

"Yes, she is really dead."

"You've seen her?"

"No, but I was there, close to Vancourt, when some doctor came in bringing the news to him. I just heard what he had to say, and then I came out here in case somebody else might blurt it out to you. I don't know," he said, "that I've done it better than any ordinary person."

"Oh, that couldn't be helped. Tell me, where was it?"

"Not very far from the town. It seems that the pony took fright at a traction engine, and threw her out on to a heap of stones. She never moved or

spoke again ; in fact, she died within a few minutes of the doctor getting there."

"Dick," I said, "it's dreadful—dreadful. What did he say?"

"Well, I was in the ante-room when the doctor was shown in ; he looked round and said, 'Is one of you gentlemen Mr Vancourt ?' Vancourt got up, and then he said, 'I'm afraid, sir, that I've brought you shocking news this morning.' 'Indeed,' said Georgey in a very casual kind of way, 'what's that?' 'I regret to say,' said the doctor, 'that your wife has met with a very terrible accident on the Idleminster Road.' 'My wife ! An accident—are you a doctor ?' said Vancourt. 'I am.' 'Then tell me the worst, don't beat about the bush, man, tell me everything.' 'I'm sorry to say,' said the doctor, 'that Mrs Vancourt expired in my arms about twenty minutes ago.' Of course we all knew," Dick went on, "that he didn't care tuppence ha'penny about her, but he stood there looking at the doctor like a bird fascinated by a snake. 'My God !' he said under his breath, 'my God—oh, my God ! You mean to say she's dead ?' 'I'm sorry to say that she is dead.' Then he turned round to us, 'You'd better get this man some brandy,' he said. Of course we did get brandy, but Georgey was quite himself all the time. 'I don't think I've quite taken it in,' he said in a queer thick kind of voice. 'Would one of you men go with me ? I suppose I ought to go. You say

that she's dead ?' 'Yes, I'm sorry to say that she's dead.' He seemed trying to impress it on his mind that she *was* dead, that there was no mistake about it, and being a doctor, and believing that he knew his business better than we could teach it him, we didn't interfere. 'Where is she ?' Vancourt asked after another dreadful pause. 'She was carried into the nearest house. She lies there now.' 'Will one of you fellows go with me ?' said Vancourt. 'I—I ought to go. I've kept my cab,' said the doctor, 'I'll go back there with you myself.' But Vancourt looked round again. 'You're awfully good. All the same I'd like one of the fellows to go with me.'"

"And who went ?"

"Your father went. He just took him by the arm and made him finish up the rest of his brandy. 'Come, my poor chap,' he said, 'I'll go with you.' Then I suddenly thought of you, that she'd probably been out here, and that it would be a double shock to you if you had parted from her so recently. So I came straight along."

"Dick," I said, "it's absolutely dreadful. She was so gay, so full of life ; she turned at the gate and waved her hand with ever such a kind smile—she *was* kind, Dick ; I know you couldn't bear her, but she was kind and considerate."

"I—I didn't like her," said Dick, frankly. "I had no cause to dislike her, and I didn't, but she was the kind of young woman who made my very gorge

rise. Still, I never thought of such a tragedy as this ; it seems dreadful that so much life and youth and vitality should be hurried into eternity like this. I think I'm more shocked and upset than I should have been if I had liked her very much."

"And Georgey ?"

"Well, he seemed stunned in a kind of way, very much as one would have expected him to be. Your father will tell you all the details."

But my father never told me the details, nobody ever did. I knew what the verdict was, read the account in the papers, sent a lovely wreath to the funeral, and so Emmeline Vancourt, who had once been called Smiley, passed out of my life for ever. I should have liked to have seen her again, poor thing, but when I broached the subject to Dick, he vetoed the suggestion entirely.

"My dear child, her own father and brothers haven't even seen her, she was frightfully disfigured."

"Oh, her father and brothers—they have been brutes to her."

"Well, they seemed quiet, well-spoken, decent men enough ; I saw nothing amiss with them. I am afraid that with her, poor child, it was continually a case of a square peg in a round hole ; she jarred upon everybody—excepting you."

"Well, for the matter of that, she jarred upon me, Dick, and yet I liked her, and I'm not going to pretend anything else."

After this, for an accident is soon forgotten, there might, to all intents and purposes, never have been an Emmeline Vancourt. I wrote to Georgey a very kind and nice letter, but I received in return a formal printed card, with his thanks for my sympathy and the beautiful flowers which I had sent to put upon his wife's coffin.

It was about a week after this that two of our officers happened to be dining with us, and one of them told me that Georgey Vancourt had that day gone away on a month's leave.

"He didn't seem over keen on going," he added, "but, of course, it was the best and only thing to do. Horrible thing, to have your wife killed like that, after being married such a short time."

"Between ourselves," said the other man, "they didn't hit it off so particularly well."

"Oh, no, the whole world knows that. Georgey made quite a marriage of convenience."

"So did she, and she never made any secret about it. She was a good soul, I liked her myself."

"Well, Georgey's soon got his freedom and his three thousand a year."

"Does he get it?" I asked.

"Every penny of it; and now," he ended up, "he'll be able to marry the other girl—if she'll have him."

I could not forbear looking down the table at Dick; such a funny look came across his face.

"Oh, I shouldn't think the other girl would look at him," he said in his cool and collected tones.

"No, nor I," said St Leger. "Why, it would be like blood money."

"No, I don't see that. He married the girl—with a little coercion, it is true—but he stuck to her. He wasn't to know that she'd get pitched out of the pony-cart and be done for in two minutes. All the same, I don't think he'll marry the other girl, or anybody else in Northtowers."

"Oh, perhaps you know who the other girl is. *I'm* not even sure that she lives in Northtowers."

"She doesn't," said Dick.

I felt myself going cold and sick. I broke in here, for I could not contain myself any longer.

"Would you mind changing the conversation? I think we might find something more cheerful to talk about. That poor girl is hardly cold in her grave, as they say, and it's absolutely horrible to be discussing her successor in these early days. I liked her—she was a good friend to me; there was a lot of good in her, and I think it's a very great pity that Georgey Vancourt didn't appreciate her more."

"Oh, well, she was palmed off on him," said St Leger.

"For the matter of that, he was palmed off on her. At anyrate she is dead, and death should settle all scores."

"Oh, we haven't any score against the poor soul."

And Dick looked down the table with a smile which I knew meant approbation.

And after that Dick went away, and before he came back again my little son was born, Dick's heir. He was a lovely child, just like his father—no, I know Dick wasn't lovely; I didn't mean to convey that, but he had the same sturdiness even though he was but a babe, and he had the same colouring. I was glad that my boy should be like his father rather than that he should resemble me, but Dick's first words when he saw him were, "Oh, Lord, he's red!"

"Well, if he *is* red? What would you have him?"

"I'd rather have had him your colour," he said promptly. "However, as the good God has seen fit that he should be red, we must make the best of him."

"I expected him to be red," I remarked loftily. "There's no 'making the best of it' for me, because I knew all along that he would be red, and red he is."

"Will he always be that colour, nurse?" Dick inquired a moment later.

"A most healthy colour, sir," the nurse replied in very indignant tones.

"Oh, is it? Then I imagine it will tone down after a time. There—it's all right, I'm as proud as a dog with two tails; I was only chaffing you."

So he escaped laughing from the room, and the nurse relieved her pent-up feelings by bestowing upon

the babe every endearing epithet which her tongue could command. "Blessed lamb! Red indeed! Tone down! Dear heart, blessed lamb!"

Long before I got about again I heard that Georgey Vancourt was back. Dick only mentioned him in the most casual way possible, but Mrs Greville came out to see me one afternoon, and she told me that he had been to see her on the previous day.

"He was dressed in mourning, certainly, my dear, but nobody would dream he had buried his wife, or any relation nearer than a godfather who had left him a fortune. You liked her, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"So I gathered. Her going was evidently a relief to Georgey; at all events, he looks as if it were."

"Oh, do you think so?"

"What do you think he said? He said he had been staying in London with his late wife's people!"

"Oh, no."

"Yes, my dear, he did—'with his late wife's people.' They are all saying, so Harry tells me, that now he's free and well-off, of course he'll marry the other girl."

"Who *is* the other girl?" I asked.

"That's the extraordinary mystery that nobody can make out. There's not a soul in the town who has ever seen Georgey Vancourt speaking to any woman at all. I did see him talking to you one day in the street—oh, long ago, before you were married,

or even engaged, to Captain Markham—and I really might have been forgiven if I had thought that Georgey Vancourt was a bit ‘gone’ on you.”

“Oh, what nonsense !”

“Yes, of course ; and so it afterwards turned out. But it did look—well—you know.”

“But how do you know that she’s in Northtowers ?”

“Well, my dear, I don’t know. What he said to the regiment at the time of his marriage was that he was engaged to a girl and in love with a girl at this end of the journey. Well, they took that, of course, to mean Northtowers.”

“Well, possibly that was only a *façon de parler* ; he may have meant some girl, any girl, not necessarily in the town.”

“He never confided anything to you, I suppose ?”

“To me ? About any other girl ? Oh, no.”

“Well, I don’t know that it matters to any of us. By the bye, Kit, he asked after you.”

“Oh, did he ? I hope you told him that I was all right ?”

“I told him you were absolutely happy in the possession of a son and heir. He said he envied you.”

“Oh, really !”

“Yes, he did. Ah, well, poor fellow, I really am sorry for him. It was a horrid experience for him, and I hope, since he has been so unlucky, that he will have a better time when he ventures on matrimony again.”

So Mrs Greville had no idea that I was the girl at this end of the journey! Well, there was comfort in that, anyway.

A little later, when I began to get about again, I met him here, there and everywhere. Of course, as was natural, since everybody knew that he had three thousand a year now, he was to be seen everywhere. Northtowers, indeed, vied with itself in trying to console him. But to me, so far from looking like a man who had got rid of a heavy burden, he gave me the impression of the most unhappy human being I had ever seen. I avoided him as much as I possibly could, and I longed—I think no human being knows how much—to hear that Georgey had fallen in love with somebody else.

CHAPTER XXIX

A NEW LEAF

"There is something very comforting in the new leaf. We all expect to turn over a new leaf one day."

IT seemed to me after this as if Georgey Vancourt had determined to turn over a new leaf. He called upon me once or twice during the winter, but always in company with one of the other men. His rooms he had given up, and had returned to his old quarters in barracks, and, as far as I could tell, the general disposition of the regiment seemed to be to feel that he had gone through a very rough time, and that, in fact, he was now reaping the reward of virtue. You see, a man who has three thousand a year unencumbered is a very different personality either to a man who has nothing a year, or a man who has three thousand a year encumbered with a wife of whom he is thoroughly ashamed ; for, without doubt, Georgey Vancourt had been cut to the quick in small things every time his wife opened her lips or showed her face in society.

"A perfectly appalling creature, my dear," said

old Lady Straversclyde to me. "I'm sure it was a merciful thing for that poor young man that the good God was pleased to take her to Himself."

"Not an appalling creature in every way, dear Lady Straversclyde. I knew her intimately, she had many good points, and a most kind and lovable disposition."

"She ought to have been selling flowers at a street corner," the old lady snapped out.

"Well, perhaps she ought, but she had many good points, and I take it that women who sell flowers at street corners have good points like—like ourselves."

"Rank Radicalism, rank Radicalism," said Lady Straversclyde in disgusted accents.

"Well, with regard to poor Emmeline, I found the general disposition was to remember her failings rather than her virtues. Did not one, Shakespeare, crystallise the thought? 'Men's evil manners live in brass, their virtues we write in water.'"

I am bound to say that by word or look or sign, from the first time I saw him after Emmeline's death, until circumstances had put a period to the incident of her existence, Georgey never uttered one word in my presence which could have been construed into a slight upon his wife's memory.

So the winter months wore away, and in the spring we received our orders for Ireland. We had always hated the idea of Ireland, and especially of living in camp, but when we came face to face with

it we found it rather a joke. You see, it makes such a difference when one is not pinched for money. By this time Dick had got his majority, and we had a hut of exceptional size and situation.

We had been settled down for some six weeks when, one afternoon, Georgey Vancourt was shown into my drawing-room. It was the first time he had come alone to call upon me since Emmeline's death. He was looking very handsome and very smart in what, in a woman, one would call half-mourning.

"I came to-day to see you," he said, "because I want to talk to you alone."

"Oh, no."

"Excuse me, I have something to say and I must say it. I am not going to bother you at all, but Markham is safely out of the road, as I happen to know, and I want to talk over the future."

"But why with me, Georgey?"

"Because I consider you have the first right to be consulted as to my future movements."

"How ridiculous! What nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"No nonsense at all about it," he said—he was absolutely cool and unabashed, "but go back over the past, and you will not forget that we were once on very intimate terms with each other."

"Well?" I said.

My heart began to beat most painfully, and I felt as if he might, at any moment, whip out a revolver and put an end to my existence—and I had no

notion of ending my career in any such manner if I could avoid it.

"Let me give you some tea, Georgey. Just touch that bell," I said as carelessly as I could.

"No, no," he said, "we don't want bothering with tea just now, we've something much more serious to attend to."

I felt myself going cold and sick, and the room began to spin slowly round and round. Georgey sat forward on his chair, leaning his elbows on his knees and touching the tips of his fingers lightly together. I remembered how, on the day that Dick had proposed to me, *he* had sat in exactly the same attitude.

"As I was saying," Georgey went on, "we were once on very intimate terms with each other. I needn't go back over the circumstances of my unhappy marriage—and the rest, but I want to express one thing to you, that I am entirely conscious of the fact that you were the only one of the entire regiment who was anything like decent to—to my poor girl."

"Oh, Georgey, I was awfully fond of her."

"Yes, I know, she said you were, and you were the last person that she spoke to. I've—I've always been glad of it. I haven't been near you lately because—in the first place, I didn't want to do anything that might seem indecently disrespectful to my wife's memory. We didn't get on; we didn't suit

each other ; she cared no more for me than I did for her."

"I'm not so sure of that," I said.

"Aren't you ? Well, I am. As it happens, there was somebody that Emmeline liked, and the very fact of that makes me feel quite free to shape my life now as I think best."

"I don't think that Emmeline bore you any malice ; I think she regarded you as her companion in misfortune, because you were both practically forced into marrying. At the same time, with a little trouble, which you did not take, and a little kindness, which you did not show, you might have made her extremely fond of you. Indeed, Georgey, I shall always believe that, under everything, your wife really did care for you."

"I don't think so."

His face was quite hard and set ; I saw it was useless to argue the point, that I should make no impression on him.

"But in any case, whether or not, that time has gone by irrevocably, and it is no use casting anything, whether of regret or sorrow, into the past. If I had been ever so much in love with her the end would have been just the same, she would have bought that pony—it would have bolted with her—she was fated to die as she did."

The thought crept through my mind that if they had been on perfectly good terms with each other

she would never have gone to the length of buying that pony without consulting him. I think he saw something of what was in my mind.

"She would have bought that pony just the same," he said, actually answering my thoughts, "for it was a splendid animal, worth twice as much as she gave for it. I know some people have been astonished that I didn't part with him or have him shot, after what happened; but the very last time she mentioned him to me she happened to speak of an almost similar accident that she had seen an account of in one of the papers. There the horse that bolted was immediately shot, and Emmeline spoke most indignantly of the brutality of putting a splendid animal out of the road because of some accident for which it was not directly responsible. I determined, as soon as I pulled myself together, and her father and brothers suggested that I should be shooting the pony, that I would do nothing of the kind, but I would carry out what I knew would be her wish. I told them so, and they agreed that, under the circumstances, I should be doing the right thing. And so I say, having driven the pony all these months, that it's no use pretending that if we had been over head and ears in love with each other I should have dissuaded her from buying the pony—I should have jumped at him at any time. No, it was a pure accident; there's nothing more or less to be said about it, it was Fate."

"Yes, I think it was Fate," I said quietly ; "but what did you come to tell me particularly ?"

"I—I came to tell you this. I have let months go by ; I haven't troubled you in any shape or form ; but now the time has come when there must be an explanation between us."

"But why ?"

"Simply for this reason. I am not over fond of single life in a regiment ; I don't want to chuck the service, I like my work, but I—I prefer it as a married man rather than as a bachelor. I feel that it is more or less useless to come and say to you what I am going to say. I might have won you for my own ; you will always be the first, the best, the dearest, the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes. She is dead ; I don't want to say anything against her—my God, why should I ?—but I was so wretched, so miserable, so absolutely unhappy as her husband that I don't know that I was quite responsible for what I said and did."

"But you are now."

"Oh—I think I am more so now. If we had married," he went on, "I don't know but what we should have been, though poor, the happiest husband and wife in the world. I feel that I should have been. But time does not stand still with any of us, and I have a sort of feeling that with you time has moved in giant strides. I came to-day to make you a formal offer of everything I have in the world. You know

exactly what it is—how I got it. If you will take me I am at your feet for ever."

" You mean—if I will go away with you ? "

" Yes. There's no fear that Markham wouldn't divorce you ; he's much too fond of you to tie you up out of spite."

" And if I don't ? "

" If you don't, Kit, there's an end of it," he said. " I shall never feel any differently towards you while life remains to me. The question is whether you like me or Markham the better."

I got up with a gush of uncontrollable emotion. Georgey got up too, and so we stood on the great fur rug before the blazing fire, and held each other's hands.

" Georgey," I said, " it's no use lying to you ; I'll tell you the honest truth, and then you'll believe me once for all, won't you ? "

" I will."

" Well, I'm hideously in love with Dick—I never was in love with you ; I thought I was—but I adore Dick with every fibre of my being ; I hate to see him go away in the morning, I long for him to come in to lunch, and if I meet him accidentally during the day, my silly heart goes thump, thump, like the heart of some school-girl. I never could have loved anybody else in the whole world but Dick—I can't imagine what I could have been thinking of to pass him over for you. Not that I want to slight you,

Georgey, you're very good-looking, you're really much handsomer than Dick, and when you are not in love with one—I mean—no, I don't mean quite that, Georgey, but when you are not in the wrong sort of love with one, you are perfectly charming ; but you're not Dick, and nobody will ever be the same as Dick to me."

"That's enough," he said, in a queer, hoarse, strained voice. "I'm never going to bother you any more. I thought it would be honourable to tell you exactly what I feel, and give you at least the chance of taking me if you happened to have any hankering after me. I didn't expect you would ; I'm not as good a man, take me all round, as Markham is, nobody knows it better than I do ; but I've loved you with all my heart, and I don't believe that even Markham could love you better."

"What are you going to do ?" I asked.

"I'm going to get married as soon as I possibly can. I don't think that I was ever quite suited to a bachelor life ; I'm a chummy sort of chap, I always want companionship, and I'd rather go back and live with Emmeline than I'd stay on in the regiment as I am."

"Oh, why couldn't you be fond of her ?" I burst out.

"Why, simply because I—I was fond of you, and she was forced upon me. We were in the same boat, she and I. Everything she did grated on me

and I daresay she felt the same with me. There was too much of her—I am not speaking against her, but she had everything in excess—too much hair, too high a colour, teeth too white, smile too pronounced, voice too loud, ways not gentle enough—oh, I know it was all my fault, she'd have been all right for a slow, heavy kind of chap, but me she drove to madness. Then she was such a contrast to you, I—I—oh, poor girl, she came to an untoward end, and I don't want to say anything against her. God knows I liked her well enough when we were only fooling, but as husband and wife we were—damn!"

"No, no, don't say that," I said.

"No, I won't say it again, I've said it once, and it's relieved me. So you—you really like Markham the best. Then you'll wish me God-speed for the future?"

"I will, I will, Georgey, with all my heart. I wish it could have been otherwise—at least—no, no, I don't wish that, but I *do* hope everything will smooth out for you."

He looked at me long, with a strange gaze, as if he were saying good-bye to me; then he took up my two hands and looked at them, smoothed them, touched my wedding ring, and finally bent his head and kissed first one and then the other.

"Good-bye, Kit," he said hoarsely, "I shall never kiss your hands again."

Then he set one free, keeping fast hold of the other.

"Some people," he said quietly, "seem to have all the luck—and oh, what a lucky beggar Markham is!"

CHAPTER XXX

WHAT I TOLD DICK

"There was once a man called Bootles. He had a way of saying, 'Don't worry, it'll all dry straight.'"

WHEN I realised that Georgey was gone, and that my girlish romance had really come to an end, that I was, so to speak, free for the rest of my life, I made a bolt for my own bedroom and locked myself in. Then I flung myself down upon the bed and cried like a child. But I did not cry for long; weeping fits and quarrels with your husband are luxuries in which you cannot indulge with impunity in a military hut, and I knew that my maid, whose room was next door to mine, would certainly be coming to ask if there was anything wrong if I went on much longer, or if my weeping got beyond my control. So I buried my face in the pillows, and after a few minutes I sat up and felt better.

"I am a fool," I said aloud as I sat on the edge of the bed. "How lucky Louise did not come in and catch me! She would certainly have connected my fit of howling with Georgey Vancourt, and, hey

presto ! there would have been a fine old scandal round the camp."

I smoothed the pillows and replaced the crumpled bedspread, and then I went to the wash-basin and bathed my face in cold water, laving my eyes afterwards with a cooling wash. I had put on my hat and was just fixing my veil when I heard Dick's voice ; in fact, the next moment he came tramping along to the bedroom.

" Come out with me," he said, " you've plenty of time, it's only just half-past five, and you'll have a room full of people if you don't come at once."

" I will come out with you with pleasure. Walking, or driving, or what ? "

I spoke in what I thought was my ordinary voice.

" Don't you feel up to much to-day ? " he said.

" No—I feel a bit stuffy, I want to get out into the air, that's why I was going out."

" Well, come out with me. Put on a coat, it's awfully cold."

The brisk drive through the wind soon blew the cobwebs out of my brain, and, I imagine, all traces of tears from my eyes, for Dick looked down at me with satisfaction and said, " You begin to look like yourself again, old woman."

" I begin to feel it, Dick," I answered. " That's the one drawback of huts, they do get so stuffy, you must either freeze or bake. I don't like freezing, so I prepare for baking, and presently, when I am

nearly cooked, I begin to find it a little too much for me."

Two or three days later than this I heard that Georgey had gone off on a few days' leave. I knew that at that time of year it would not be very long, and, sure enough, a week later Dick came laughing into the drawing-room and let fly a thunderbolt at me.

"Now, what do you think the latest news is?"

"News? What sort of news? Oh, don't spin it out, tell me. I've heard nothing; I've seen nobody all day."

"Well, Georgey Vancourt's going to be married," he said.

"Oh, is he? And who is the lady?"

"You'll never guess, you'll never guess, not if you guess for a month. Hullo! here's St Leger."

"How d'you do, Mrs Markham?" said the newcomer, looking round for a convenient chair on which to deposit his long legs. "You've heard the news?"

"I've heard the news, but I haven't heard who the lady is."

"You'll never guess, not if you guess for a twelve-month."

"Ah, that's almost exactly what Dick said. Do I know her?"

"Oh, yes, you know her right enough."

"Oh, do I? Then tell me, please; don't keep

me in suspense. And why are you making such a joke of it? He was sure to get married again."

"Oh, I don't know. I think if I had made such a bad shot the first time I should have thought twice before I made a second, especially as he's so extremely well provided for."

"But who is she?" I persisted.

"Well, it's little Miss Dennison."

"Of Northtowers?"

"Of Northtowers. Now confess, Mrs Markham, it has taken your breath away."

"Well, in a sense it has, but only in a sense. I think Georgey Vancourt is very lucky; she's pretty, and a lady. No money, I suppose, but that does not matter as Georgey is well provided for."

"Yes, but you don't seem to see the joke? We've all been speculating, ever since the time that Georgey went up and was nobbled into marrying Miss Smiley, who the girl was at the Northtowers end of the journey, and the funny thing is that not a soul ever suspected little Miss Dennison."

"No, I suppose not, I suppose not. But *was* she the girl?"

"Of course she was. Poor old Georgey made such a parade of his broken heart, and those precious letters he lost, everybody knew they were from her."

"Oh, did they?"

"Of course they did. And now, you see, as old

Bootles used to say, 'it's all dried straight,' and he and the girl are going to be happy after all."

"And poor Emmeline lies in her grave. You know I liked her."

"I know you did, everybody wondered you did ; but then you'd find good in anybody."

"Oh, don't flatter me, don't flatter me. But are you quite sure," I said, changing my tone, "are you quite sure that Georgey is engaged to little Miss Dennison ?"

"He announced it at dinner last night."

"Then he has come back ?"

"Yes, he was at dinner last night ; he was pretty chirpy about it."

"I'm glad, I'm awfully glad ! Of course, the regiment will be all agog with it, and you'll have to fork out for another wedding present."

"We sha'n't mind that, Mrs Markham, under the circumstances."

Then he betook himself away—I presume to see some of the other married ladies and talk over the latest bit of news with them. This left me alone with Dick, and with something to say.

"Dick," I said, after a minute or so, "I'm awfully glad that Georgey Vancourt is going to be married again."

"So am I," said he, "although I don't know that it's much of a catch for the girl."

"No, perhaps not. And yet things had fallen out

for him in a wretched enough way, and it seems to have pleased Providence to put things as straight as—well, as could be. All the same, Dick, there's one thing I wanted just to mention to you."

"Yes?"

"Yes, it's like this. You've thought all along; at least—"

Oh, how silly I was! Why couldn't I tell him straight, instead of bungling it as I was doing?

"What is it?" he asked, looking round at me in his kindest way. "What is it, old woman? Out with it."

"Well, Dick, it's just this. You seem to have thought, like all the others—well—that Georgey was—about the other girl."

"What about the other girl?"

"It has been on the tip of my tongue to tell you, Dick, times and again, ever since—before we were married—"

"Well?"

"Well—Lillian Dennison didn't happen to be the other girl—that's all."

"And did you," said Dick, looking at me in an odd kind of way, "did you imagine for one moment that I thought she was?"

"I thought you thought so."

"My dear child, I never set up for being a brilliant man, and, God knows, I couldn't have played the part if I had tried, but do you think I haven't known all

along the exact truth, do you think I didn't go into it all with my eyes open, that I didn't know all along Vancourt's value—and his want of value? Good life, child, what do you take me for?"

"You knew—you knew—when I went to Idleminster that day—that—that—that—"

"Come, out with it. We've been playing this game of hide-and-seek for a long time now, let's drop it all, and tell the bald truth for a change."

"You knew that day at Idleminster why I had gone?"

"Yes, I did. I knew that you fancied yourself in love with Vancourt. Pooh! A woman of your calibre doesn't really love so easily as that. I—I thought you were worth winning, and I wanted to win you in my own way. Now, do you understand?"

"I understand something—not very much, I'm afraid, I'm too dazed to say much. I don't think, Dick, I've ever understood you or valued you—I haven't anything to say, Dick."

"Then why take the trouble to say it? My dear child, I'd heard all Vancourt's pitiful little story before ever I set out that morning. I hadn't any idea that you were the girl he was afraid might have gone to Idleminster to be married, no, I didn't know that much, but when I met you in the station, overwhelmed with agitation, fluttered out of your senses, not knowing how to account for your presence, I

saw there was only one way out of it, and I took that way."

"You married me—out of pity!"

"Did I? I didn't know it. I married you—at least I asked you to marry me, it is not quite the same thing, my dear Kit—because I had long loved you, I had wanted you—well, I had wanted you very badly. I would have felt myself a mean hound to have trapped you into any sort of marriage that was hateful to you to go into, but although at first I had an idea that you were a bit spoony on Vancourt, I very soon found that I'd made a mistake—that it was me you wanted, that I was the man you really liked. Wasn't I a true prophet?"

"Oh, Dick, Dick, Dick, what am I to say to you?"

"Just nothing," said he, "just nothing at all. When you saved yourself from an extremely awkward situation, you made me just the happiest man in the whole world. I've known everything, dearest, all along. Now, you know very well that I've never set up for being a good-looking chap, I know exactly what my looking-glass tells me—it's that I'm no beauty. But if I'm no beauty, I believe that I'm the most self-sufficient and conceited chap that I ever knew in the whole course of my life. I put myself in the scale with poor old Georgey, and, by Jove! I weighed the scale down. But eaten alive with conceit I am—you'll always find it so with red-haired men—"

"In the first place," I said, "you're *not* red haired, and, in the second place, you are *not* conceited—don't talk to me, I know you inside out, you're my husband, and I—I just adore you. I won't have you abused, even by yourself. I've been a fool all along, an idiot—"

"Excuse me," he said, with a fine assumption of authority, "but Mrs Markham is my wife, and I don't allow anybody to abuse my wife, not even my wife herself. So stop all that, if you please, and just tell me once more what you let slip just now. I've been waiting a long time to hear you say it. I knew that it was true, but I wasn't sure that you'd ever bring yourself to tell me so."

"Why, Dick, I've been dying to tell you for months and months—and years, for the matter of that; I believe I wanted to tell you ages ago, before you ever looked at me."

"What did you want to tell me?" His voice, his tone was infinitely tender.

"You know without my telling you."

"Yes, I know without your telling me, that's quite true. All the same, I'd like to hear you say it, just once—if you haven't any objection."

"Dick," I said, "I adore you!"

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